

A Consideration of How the Communicative Approach Can Be Used to Teach Grammar to the Third Year Students at Military Technical Academy

Nguyen Thi Ngoc Trang*

Military Technical Academy, 236 Hoang Quoc Viet, Cau Giay, Hanoi

Received 02 August 2016

Revised 26 September 2016; Accepted 22 December 2016

Abstract: This study aims at considering how Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can be applied to raise the quality of grammar teaching and learning at Military Technical Academy (MTA). To achieve the objective, two instruments were employed: survey questionnaire and classroom observation. The findings indicate that both teachers and students are quite positive about grammar teaching and learning, but there is still a big gap between the teachers' limited use of communicative techniques and the students' need of communicative activities. Based on the observation analysis of a communicative grammar lesson, the researcher came to the conclusion that the "weak" version of CLT may be applied to teach grammar effectively. The study also presents pedagogical implications for applying CLT to teaching grammar in non-English major universities.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching, grammar, non-English major universities.

1. Introduction

In a non-English major university like MTA, teaching grammar still plays an important role in facilitating students to understand and translate technical materials- a crucial target of learning English in technical universities. The teaching method of grammar here has changed gradually but it is basically traditional. Teachers spend a lot of time presenting and explaining lengthy explicit grammar rules. They focus too much on the form and haven't paid enough attention to help students to practice the use through communicative activities. Therefore, they find it hard to speak naturally and freely due to thinking too much about grammar. In fact, not a

few students can't communicate in simple everyday activities during and after English courses. Besides, the traditional method-grammar translation has reinforced the passive learning style among students through listening and note-taking in an environment lack of interactive activities. These shortcomings call for treating "grammar more communicatively in the classroom" (Canh, 2004:147) for the purpose of raising the students' active role and communicative competence in the learning process.

Nevertheless, applying CLT does not simply mean throwing the traditional approach away. The traditional approach still has many advantages for the English teaching and learning context at my Academy like the accurate knowledge of language, the teachers' and students' familiarity with this method, its less requirement for time allowance and classroom facilities, etc. Moreover, successful

* Tel.: 84-935524382

Email: trangntn28@yahoo.com

application of CLT requires certain conditions such as class size, language environment, teacher's facilitator role, students' active role, etc. which cannot be all met in the context of English teaching and learning at MTA. That is why the application of CLT to teaching grammar at MTA needs a careful consideration of the teaching and learning context so that some adaptation of CLT or some combination of CLT and the traditional method can be made to make full use of the advantages and minimize the drawbacks of the two approaches. In other words, the aim of the study is to find out a suitable communicative approach to teach grammar to the third year students at MTA. To achieve the aim and the objectives of the thesis, the following research questions were proposed:

1. *How is grammar in fact taught by the teachers and learnt by the 3rd year students at MTA?*

2. *To what degree is CLT used to teach grammar to the third year students at MTA?*

2. Literature review

2.1. In late 1960s, the well-known American linguist Noam Chomsky indicated that the current standard structural theories of language couldn't reflect the basic features of language- the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. Besides, applied linguists also pointed out that language teaching didn't pay enough attention to a fundamental dimension of language-the functional and communicative potential of language. Consequently, this kind of teaching produced "structurally competent" students who were often "communicatively incompetent" (Johnson, K and K, Morrow, 1981). Such criticisms led to the appearance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or Communicative Approach (CA). It was based on the premise that language is for communication and real communication; meaningful task and meaningful language can promote learning.

2.2. Howatt (1984: 279) distinguishes between the weak and the strong version of CLT. The weak version stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes and therefore attempts to integrate communicative activities into the programme of language teaching. As different from this, the strong version of communicative language teaching claims that language can be acquired only through communication. This would mean that teaching involves not just "activating an existing knowledge of the language", but "stimulating the development of the language system itself" (Howatt, p. 279). It is worth noticing that while the strong version of the communicative movement pays no attention to grammar learning in the classroom, the weak version attempts to integrate a communicative component into a traditional setting (Allwright, 1977).

2.3. Early approaches downplayed the importance of grammar, some even advocating the abandonment of any focus on form. In natural approach - one of the current communicative approaches, Terrell (1977: 330) suggests that all grammatical instruction and practice activities should be done outside the class so that the classroom time is not wasted in grammatical lectures or manipulative exercises. He also believes that manipulation of grammar rules should be applied in writing or in prepared speech. In addition, if grammar explanations must be done in the classroom, Krashen and Terrell, recommended that they should be short, simple and in the target language.

2.4. More recent approaches acknowledge the centrality of grammar and try to teach the learners the relationship between grammatical form and communicative meaning. However, CLT believes that language is learned through exposure and interaction. Thus, CLT makes little or no provision for the formal instruction of grammar, and students are encouraged to identify and learn the rules. Grammar is not seen as a set of rules to be memorized but to be internalized and used for communication.

Celce-Murcia (1988:27) proposes a four part grammar lesson successfully applying a communicative approach to teaching grammar. The first part is presentation in which we introduce the grammar structure inductively or deductively. The next part is focused practice which allows the learners to manipulate the structure in question while all other variables are held constant. As a result, the learners gain control of the form without the added pressure and distraction of trying to use the form for communication. After that the learners engages in communicative activities to practice the new structure in communicative practice. Finally, the teacher gives feedback and correction. Although this is the final part, Celce Murcia notes that it must take place through out the lesson. In focused practice, correction should be straightforward and immediate. However, in communicative practice the teacher should take note of errors and deal with them after the communicative exercises.

2.5. CLT has been recognised and applied widely in the world and in Vietnam because of its pedagogical values. It can be well-observed that the learners are often much motivated when their teachers apply CLT to teaching language. They are encouraged to discover rules, use their language to complete exciting authentic tasks, and communicate well in both oral and written form. The research into CLT application in improving the quality of teaching and learning has become a favourite choice among language teachers. However, most of the related researches are about teaching English in general or speaking skill. Some studies deal with grammar but they are different from the aim of this study - finding out a suitable communicative approach to teach grammar to MTA students. One study by Tran Thi Thu Hien is about using oral activities to teach grammar communicatively to first year non English major students at Vietnam University of Commerce. The other by Nguyen Thi Hien studies the impact of communicative approach to grammar teaching on students' interest at Institute of Foreign Language - Hanoi

University of Agriculture. It is hoped that language teachers, especially those who teach in non English schools/ universities could find the analysed results and practical suggestions of teaching grammar presented in this study really useful for teaching practice.

3. Methodology

The aim of the study is to find out a more communicative approach to teach grammar, so it is inevitable to investigate into the teachers and the learners' attitudes towards, difficulties of, and preferred methods and techniques of teaching and learning grammar. To do so, the main method of the study is **survey questionnaire**, in which two types of questionnaire are designed and sent to the learners and the teachers.

Furthermore, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the suggested approach, the teachers of English at MTA are invited to **observe** the researcher's grammar lessons and complete observation sheets afterwards.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Survey questionnaire

The data collected from survey questionnaire is used to answer the first research question:

How is grammar in fact taught by the teachers and learnt by the 3rd year students at MTA?

4.1.1. The teachers' and the students' attitudes towards grammar teaching.

Firstly, it can be seen clearly that all the informants, both teachers and students agreed that grammar teaching and learning is important (Table 1, Table 2).

Obviously, the biggest aim of teaching and learning grammar is to prepare for the exams with 90.1% of the teachers and even 100% of

the students. For other reasons like better translation and communication, much more teachers than students can see the point of learning grammar with 68.2% and 45.6 % respectively. The most impressive finding in the second question is that just small number (10%) of the students said that they learn grammar to communicative better. Students can't see the link between learning grammar and improving communicative competence because of the way teachers teach grammar. It is well-observed that most of the teachers focus on presenting the form of an grammar item and having students complete controlled practice aiming at structural accuracy. There are almost no communicative activities followed to help students use grammar in real communication. In fact, there are various challenges for teachers and students to apply CLT at MTA (Table 3).

Table 1. The teachers' and the students' awareness of the importance of grammar teaching and learning (%)

Question 1	Teachers	Students
Very important	0	0
Important	100	100
Not very important	0	0
Total	100	100

The reasons are addressed in the following table.

Table 2. The teachers' and the students' aims to teach and learn grammar (%)

Question 2	Teachers	Students
Good results in the exams	90.1	100
Better reading and translating ESP materials	68.2	32
Better communication	45.6	10

The greatest difficulty for the teachers is time allowance. Most of the teachers complained that they have to teach as quickly as possible to cover all parts in three page grammar session in one lesson.

Table3. The teachers' and the students' difficulties in learning English grammar (%)

Question 3	Teachers	Students
Limited time allowance	100	57
Passive students/ Unenthusiastic teachers	95	21
Unqualified Ss/ Ineffective teaching methods	86.4	67
Boring course book	63.6	52
Large class	90.9	86
Helping Ss understand the use of grammatical structures/ Understanding the use of grammatical structures	27.3	69

This is why the teacher said they did not have time to organize communicative activities. As the table shows the second biggest challenge that 95% of the teachers have to cope with is the passive students. The support for this finding is also found in the researcher's observation that the majority of the students sit in silence, they rarely raise their voice unless their teachers ask them to do so and they are often reluctant to take part in activities. Undoubtedly, the teachers are often demotivated when teaching these passive students.

Another difficulty that a great number of the teachers (86.4%) have to cope with is unqualified students. Although most of the students learnt English at high school but their English is really weak because they had to focus on "khối A" (three subjects: maths, physics, chemistry) for the university entrance exam. Their grammar is very basic, vocabulary is also extremely limited and many of them even cannot speak simple English sentences. To fix "knowledge holes" for many students under time pressure, using grammar-translation method is easier for teachers. Besides, 63.6% of the teachers' responses and 52% of the

students' responses showed that the teachers and the students both find the course books boring. As far as the materials are concerned, "New Headway" textbook, workbook and CDs by John & Liz Soars (Oxford Uni. Press) are being used for teaching General English at MTA. These coursebooks are claimed to combine the best traditional methods with current teaching techniques. The problems with these course books can be found in both main parts: language input (grammar and vocabulary) and skills development. For the first part, there are too many and easy focused practice exercises, but there are almost no communicative practice activities. For the other part, the difficulty levels of reading texts and listening exercises are not consistent, either too easy or too difficult, and many topics are not updated and thus they can't interest students. The need for a more communicative-oriented coursebooks or material compilation has become urgent.

"Large class" was found to be a great problem for both the teachers (90.9%) and the students (86%). The fact that about 40 students in an English class at MTA always prevents the teachers from taking care of each students' progress and organizing any communicative activities. Large class also creates good conditions for the students to make noise, use the mother tongue and do their own business. As a result, the teachers find it hard to control the class and certainly this problem seriously affects the quality of teaching and learning English.

The most notable finding relating to the students' areas of difficulties is that while only a small number of the teachers (27.3%) had difficulty in presenting the use of grammatical structures, up to 69% of students considered this problem as the second hardest one. This fact reveals that teachers' teaching techniques haven't led to expected results. Thus, teachers should exploit other techniques such as showing pictures, talking about experience, peer check, role plays, etc. to facilitate students' understanding and practising language.

4.1.2. The teachers' common and the students' favourite techniques/ activities used in grammar teaching and learning

The study also reveals the favourite techniques and activities used in teaching grammar by teachers.

Table 4. The teachers' common and the students' favourite techniques/ activities used in grammar teaching and learning (%)

Question 5	Teachers	Students
A. Guiding Ss to discover rules	54.5	87
B. Directly telling smb about rules	45.5	13
C. Using pictures, songs, realia, clips, etc.	13.6	93
D. Translating disconnected sentences	22.7	5
E. Making Ss' own examples	27.3	76
F. Doing substitution drills	9.1	4
G. Reading and listening to passages containing focused grammar items	27.3	82
H. Using communicative activities: information gap, role play, etc.	13.6	97
I. Memorising pattern drills	4.5	2
J. Working in pairs or groups	41	91

Obviously, many MTA teachers prefer techniques of Grammar-Translation Method (telling the rules/ translation). Just a few of them choose to use techniques of Audio - Lingual method like doing substitution drills or memorising patterns. Notably, more than half of the teachers (54.5%) enjoy guiding students to discover rules and nearly half of the teachers (41%) would like to use interactive patterns

(pair/ group work)- two prominent feature of CLT but still they are not ready for other important CLT techniques such as asking Ss to make personal examples (27.3%), reading/ listening to passages (27.3%), using realia/ pictures/ songs (13.6%); using communicative activities at class (13.6%). On the contrary, almost all students (from 93% to 97%) enjoy learning with those techniques. This fact suggests MTA teachers need to try harder to apply CLT in teaching grammar for the success of learners.

4.2. Classroom observation

4.2.1. Lesson description

From the data analysis above, the pedagogical context of teaching grammar at MTA is characterized with three features. Firstly, having a good command of grammar is really necessary for MTA students to read technical materials at university and later at work. Secondly, temporary techniques that MTA teachers are using haven't met the students' demand for more effective communicative activities. Thirdly, the practical difficulties like students' low language level, large class, time pressure, boring coursebooks, etc. prevent the application of the strong CLT version. Therefore, it is believed that the weak CLT version may be applied to teach grammar successfully here. To test this hypothesis, the researcher conducted a grammar lesson (Celce-Murcia, 1988) on passive voice in the light of the "weak" version of communicative approach and invite other teachers to come and complete observation sheets. The lesson lasted for two periods and was divided into four stages: *presentation, focused practice, communicative practice, teacher feedback and correction*. In the presentation stage, the researcher tried to reach two aims: focusing the students' attention on the passive voice in a natural context, and eliciting the rule for forming the passive from the students. Her technique was using pictures of seven countries and seven products which are made or grown in those countries. She began asking the students to guess the names of

seven countries. Then she encouraged the students to identify the country in which some product is made or grown. This activity helped the students get familiar with the form of the passive voice and lead to the use of the passive voice. Eliciting some examples from the students, she wrote two examples on the blackboard. Then she explained the use of the passive voice by asking the students about the important information which interested the writer. After she elicited the use of the passive voice from the students, she continued eliciting the form. She also asked the students to read the grammar reference at the back of the Student's Book so that the students could thoroughly understand the passive voice, gradually make progress in self-study, and the teacher also had more time to organize more communicative activities.

In the second stage - focused practice, the researcher instructed the students to complete selective exercises in the Student's Book. The researcher chose only basic and important exercises to do at class, the rest are left for the students to do at home. The researcher also made use of the focused practice to teach four skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing together by asking the students to do exercises orally or in the written form, asking the students to read the instruction in each exercise and the researcher tried to speak in English as much and simply as possible. During the stage, correction was predominantly straightforward and immediate.

In the third stage- communicative practice, the teacher instructed the students to play a game. The teacher divided the class into four groups and called two students to play the role of an artist and a stylish man. The artist made many changes to the stylish man. Four groups wrote the passive voice sentences to describe the changes in ten minutes. Then four groups read the sentences in turns and the group that had more passive sentences was the winner. The aim of the game was to encourage the students to use the passive voice and use their English creatively. This game was enthusiastically welcomed by the students.

The fourth stage - teacher feedback and correction took place throughout the lesson. In the second stage, correction was predominantly immediate, but in the third stage, the researcher only took note of errors and dealt with them in the fourth stage.

4.2.2. Teachers' evaluation

Nine teachers at English Departure of MTA were invited to observe the lesson conducted by the researcher. They were required to give comments on the lesson by completing classroom observation sheets. Almost all techniques all received good comments from the teachers as follows.

Table 6. Evaluation of techniques

Techniques	Evaluation (%)			
	Very good	Good	Not very good	Bad
1.1. Using visual aids	100			
1.2. Eliciting new grammatical rules	66.7	33.3		
1.3. Asking students to correct by themselves	33.3	66.7		
1.4. Asking Ss to do peer correction		100		
1.5. Using Vietnamese	11.1	77.8	11.1	
1.6. Varying the learner participation	100			
1.7. Using words of praise	100			

The findings of the activities are also optimistic (Table 7).

Finally, the results from the last section shows that the class environment facilitates English teaching and learning progress quite well (Table 8).

Table 7. Evaluation of activities

Activities	Evaluation			
	Very good	Good	Not very good	Bad
2.1. Guessing from pictures	100			
2.2. Translation		100		
2.3. Information exchange	66.7	33.3		
2.4. Dialogue		100		
2.5. Reading aloud		100		
2.6. Question-answer	100			
2.7. Game	100			

Table 8. Evaluation of class environment

Class environment	Evaluation			
	Very good	Good	Not very good	Bad
3.1. The teacher's attitude towards the learners	100			
3.2. The teacher's class management		100		
3.3. The learners' attitude towards the teacher		100		
3.4. The learners' participation in activities	100			
3.5. The teacher-learner interaction		100		
3.6. The learner-learner interaction	66.7	33.3		

From the results of the observation, the weak version of CLT is believed to be applied in teaching grammar successfully at MTA.

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Principles

When applying CLT to teaching grammar, there is no ready-made recipe for which techniques and activities can work best for which structure, but the primary principle is the *use of a variety of techniques and activities* to suit different students' levels and learning styles.

The second principle is to put communicative activities in *real situations* with real needs and purposes for communication. If the teacher says "It's such a heavy box that I can't hold it. Who can help me?" to teach the use of *such* and *so* while in fact the box is empty, students will feel reluctant to help the teacher as they know the box is not heavy at all. In this case, the situation is not real, so even the sentences are very good and clear, the teacher cannot create real communication needs between the teacher and the students. Thus, she does not succeed in teaching grammar communicatively.

In teaching practice "boring coursebooks" is often a big challenge for teachers to apply CLT. Instead of waiting for a change of coursebooks, teachers should actively *personalize the textbooks* to address specific students' needs and interests, as well as to teach grammar in a more communicative way. For example, teachers can ask students to use the new grammatical structures to talk or write about the things they find interesting or things that they have experienced themselves. From my teaching experience, students are especially interested in such topics as music, movies, sport, football, idols, etc.

5.2. Techniques

Besides mastering the principles above to make classroom activities more communicative, teachers can employ three following concrete techniques and activities which prove to be really useful in the TESL context.

Firstly, *pictures* are considered to be useful resources for teachers. Pictures can be

presented in pairs (e.g. the same objects or person on two different occasions), or grouped into semantically related sets representing animals, fruits, flowers, or become a part of a sequence of pictures that tells a story. No matter what the forms of pictures are, they can be used in all phases of a grammar lesson (presentation, focused practice, communicative practice, feedback and correction). Celce-Murcia (1988) thinks that interesting or entertaining pictures motivates students to respond in ways that more routine teaching aids, such as a textbook or a sentence on the board, cannot. Pictures are especially useful for students with difficulties in understanding long and complicated verbal cues.

Another way is using *games* which is believed to have a great educational value. Lee, W. R. holds that most language games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms (1979: 2). Games can lower anxiety, thus making the acquisition of input more likely" (Richard-Amato, 1988: 147). They are highly motivating and entertaining, and they can give shy students more opportunity to express their opinions and feelings (Hansen 1994: 118). In order to use games to teach ESL successfully, Celce-Murcia (1988: 132) reminds us that teacher must be sure that students are familiar with the words and structures needed to carry out the tasks. Quick drills or exercises should usually be done before students play the game or solve the problem. This will encourage them to practice the appropriate forms rather than the pidgin-like forms that may result when second language learner are forced to engage in a communicative tasks before they have sufficient command of the words and structures needed to accomplish it. What is more, teacher also has to pay attention to choosing appropriate games which correspond to students' level well as when to use games. Rixon (1981:70) suggests that games be used at all stages of the lesson, provided that they are suitable and carefully chosen.

Besides, based on the findings, one of the hardest problem that MTA teachers have to face

is to make students to actively engage in speaking activities. A very good solution to this problem is to use *information gap activities*. In an information gap activities, one person has certain information that must be shared with others in order to solve a problem, gather information or make decisions (Neu & Reeser, 1997). Information gap activities give every student the opportunity to speak in the target language for an extended period of time. In addition, speaking with peers is less nervous than presenting in front of the entire class and being evaluated. Another advantage of information gap activities is that students are forced to negotiate meaning because they must make what they are saying comprehensible to others in order to accomplish the task (Neu & Reeser, 1997). Also, information gap activities practices listening and speaking, reading and writing at the same time, i.e., students skim and scan (reading skills) for missing information, exchange information (listening and speaking) and jot down the missing information (writing) and use thinking skills in the process.

5.3. Grammar teaching model

Based on the classroom observation of this study, in non English major environment, a grammar teaching model of 4 sections (presentation, focused practice, communicative practice, teacher feedback and correction) suggested by Celce-Murcia proves to be appropriate for students who need both structural accuracy and communicative competence.

6. Conclusion

The study not only investigated into the fact of grammar teaching and learning at MTA but also suggested a suitable communicative approach applied to teach grammar to the third year students. Both MTA teachers and students think that grammar teaching and learning is a crucial target of English courses here. However, there are various difficulties that prevent them

from getting successful outcomes. The study also reveals the big gap between the teachers' limited use of communicative techniques and the students' preference for communicative activities. Based on the pedagogical context at MTA, the researcher suggested applying the weak CLT version to teach grammar and proved its suitability through class observation. Finally, some practical implications are presented to increase the effectiveness of applying CLT to teach grammar, which include principles, prominent techniques/activities - using pictures, games, information gap activities and the grammar teaching model. Hopefully, this study will be worthwhile for those who are concerned with applying CLT to teach grammar in non-English major environments.

References

- [1] Le Van Canh, Understanding foreign language teaching methodology, VNU Publishing House, Hanoi, 2004.
- [2] Johnson, K. and K. Morow (eds.), Communication in the classroom, Longman, London, 1981
- [3] Howatt. A. P. R., A history of English language teaching, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.
- [4] Allwright, R., "Language learning through communication practice", *ELT Documents* 76(3), (1977) 2
- [5] Terrell, T.D. "A natural approach to the acquisition and learning of a language". *Modern Language Journal*, 61 (1977) 325
- [6] Celce-Murcia, M., Techniques and Resources in teaching grammar, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.
- [7] Lee, W. R., Language teaching games and contests, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979.
- [8] Richard-Amato, P. A., Making it happen: Interaction in the Second Language classroom: From Theory to Practice, Longman, New York, 1988.
- [9] Rixon, S, How to use games in language teaching, Macmillan Publishers Ltd, London, 1981.
- [10] Neu, H. & Reeser, T. W., Parle-moi un peu!: Information Gap Activities for Beginning French Classes. Heinle & Heinle, Boston, 1997.