

Teaching Grammar in Iraqi Secondary Schools by Using the Communicative Approach

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Abstract: The aim of the present paper is to describe the teaching grammar process in Iraqi secondary schools based on the Communicative Approach (CA) with reference to teacher's experience and the difficulties that the teachers face during teaching the class. Teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools is the dominant content in the syllabus and is preferred to other skills. Additionally, teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools using other methods, such as: Grammar-Translation method (GTM) which is considered as the principal method, 'Direct method' (DM) and 'Indirect method' (IM) enable teachers to meet what learners need during learning the grammatical structures.

Keywords: Teaching grammar; Grammatical structures; Communicative approach; Grammar-Translation Method; Direct Method; Indirect Method

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language has acquired a genuine global role in facilitating progressive and practical development in sciences, business, industry, and so on. Teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools is extremely important and essential when learning a foreign language. It is the dominant content in the syllabus and is preferred to other skills. Structurally, grammatical patterns transmitted through teaching and assimilated in learning *English* as a foreign language can also help in improving the mother-tongue. For instance, Crystal (2008: 217) defines teaching grammar or pedagogical, as “a grammar designed specifically for the purposes of teaching or learning a (foreign) language, or for developing one's awareness of the mother-tongue.”

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2. Teaching Grammar in Iraqi Secondary Schools Using the Communicative Approach

Teaching English as a foreign language has acquired a genuine global role in facilitating progressive and practical development in sciences, business, industry, and so on. Most of the difficulties students encounter when being taught the English language lie in differentiating the foreign language from their mother tongue (Alonso 2011: 1)

In English-Iraqi curricula, different expressions are correlated with the word 'teaching' such as teaching vocabulary, teaching listening, teaching speaking, teaching reading, teaching writing, and teaching grammar. Among these, grammatical skills require great proficiency in teaching as well as in learning. Regarding learning, two additional skills are required: understanding and memorization. Grammar can have negative connotations with respect to both teaching and learning. For instance, Dykes (2007: 3) points out that "the word grammar invokes a negative reaction in both teachers and students. Many teachers have come through a period in which grammar was neglected; for others, grammar has been taught in a haphazard way." For teachers, grammar evokes a negative impression because they encounter various difficulties when teaching such as time, classroom management, efficiency, experience, careless students, lack of an adequate lesson plan, preparation, not applying the right method, insufficient practice, and imprecise theory.

Teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools using the communicative approach requires high proficiency, especially for teachers who are new to the profession. Maxom (2009: 3) contends that if new teachers do not prepare themselves well before entering the classroom by making sure they have all the necessary information and present this to the students in a well-organized manner, their job will be difficult and this will reflect negatively on the students. In addition, she adds that teachers should divide their lesson into different stages of presentation, practice, and production so that they have an effective structure.

Teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools is extremely important and essential when learning a language. It is the dominant content in the syllabus and is preferred to other skills. Consequently, more than half of all lesson time is devoted to learning grammar. The grammatical structure, in the textbook: *English for Iraq*, is one of the key subjects that needs to be taught in secondary schools and, to be understood comfortably, needs to be taught in such a way that it can be learnt easily. However, this is not the case for all students as Barnes (2007: 4) notes that a grammatical rule may be accommodated eagerly by some learners and viewed with dismay by others. In this case, the purpose of teaching grammar is for the learner to memorize it in as simple as possible fashion. Meiring and Norman (2007: 76) usefully explain that grammar is useful for pupils in lessening the load on the brain by memorizing a definite rule such as the passive rule, especially for those of a low ability and who are designated as having "Special Needs".

In terms of the communicative approach, some teachers employ this while others draw on different or additional approaches. It depends on the teacher and the students. Teachers use these methods when presenting, explaining, practising, and giving feedback after applying different tests of the grammatical theory. Learners will face difficulties learning in the classroom if teachers miss one of these processes, which may occur due to a lack of experience and the constraints of time. Initially, experience in teaching enables the teacher to know how to control and run the lesson and how to deal with students in the classroom. In such cases, the teacher is the guide and the dominant person in the classroom. Accordingly, Jiang (2015: 3) pointed out that, based on their experience, schoolteachers should take up the applicable concerns, which differ according to where they use this method, while performing their job in the classroom.

Additionally, regarding the importance of experience, Taylor (2017: 95-96), in a paper entitled *Reframing Identity: Exploring my Pedagogy through Memories of Past*, described her experience in teaching, what past memories had taught her, and what learners need in order to be understood. She explained that: "My experience taught me that more often than not children thrive in their learning if their social and emotional needs are understood." Thus, experience provides teachers with an increasing number of accurate observations of students, especially if repeated, that enable them to understand their personal requirements.

Secondly, another major constraint in the classroom is that of time. McLure (2005: i) argued that having sufficient time is essential for both teachers and learners. Teachers cannot deliver the material in the class effectively when only 40 minutes is allocated for each lesson and there is a break of just 5 minutes. This period of time is short for *English for Iraq* classes, especially for grammatical structures that require more explanation, more practice, more communication, and a greater number of examples. However, if the time is not sufficient, teachers will not be able to cover all the material during the class. Regarding the necessity for more time, De Messieres (2014: 2) maintains that a shortage of time means that language teaching classes can only focus on the theoretical basis of the development of language. Thus, both experience and time are urgently needed to teach syntactic structures. Without them, teachers will face difficulties teaching grammar in general, which will have a negative impact on pupils.

An additional constraint is the need for tests, which are extremely important for both teachers and students. Logically, this requires a specific focus on dealing with tests, making it a unique learning goal (De Messieres et al. 2013: 2). The educational system that deals with tests of English language in Iraqi secondary schools has imposed several restraints. For instance, learners must demonstrate "knowledge of language and an ability to use the language." For learners in secondary stages, these features are interrelated and constitute one entity (Johnston and Farrell 2013: 2).

In academic terms, using the communicative approach based on its central theoretical perspective of communicative competence to teach language in Iraqi secondary schools is extremely valuable, more so than other approaches as it has a main characteristic. Benati (2009: 65) argued that the major characteristic of this approach is that it is a type of education that focuses on the student. He believes it constitutes an extremely revolutionary approach to foreign language teaching because it focuses on both teaching and learning.

Moreover, teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools using the communicative approach is one of the essential lessons when teaching a language: the grammatical structures. In general, the English curriculum in Iraqi secondary schools, known as *English for Iraq*, is designed on the basis of a “grammatical and functional syllabus.” They are taught and learned by applying a communicative approach aimed principally at developing “Communicative Competence (CC)”, (Johnston and Farrell 2013: 2). The Communicative Approach (CA), along with additional terms offered by different linguists such as Canale and Swain, has been interpreted as:

grammatical (or grammar-based), which is organized on the basis of linguistic [...] grammatical forms, i.e., phonological forms, morphological form, syntactic patterns, lexical items [...] these forms may be combined to form grammatical sentences, and functional/ notional (or communication-based) approaches to second language teaching. (Canale and Swain 1980: 2)

Alternatively, Cowan (2008: 33) termed it “Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)”, which indicates that learning inside the schoolroom depends on both procedures and objectives. Savignon (2002: 1) explains that “communicative competence” is the basic theoretical kernel in communicative language teaching. According to Tarvin (2014: 2), the theory of “Communicative Competence” describes “the ability to use language, or to communicate, in a culturally-appropriate manner in order to make meaning and accomplish social tasks with efficacy and fluency through extended interaction.” This theory was originally formulated by Hymes (1972) to compare the notion of communication in a language with the competence theory devised by Chomsky. In linguistic terms, Chomsky postulated that:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky 1965: 3)

Thus, from Chomsky’s perspective, linguistic theory depends on the “ideal speaker-listener” and its focus is on describing the nonconcrete capabilities that interlocutors possess and which enable them to output grammatically correct structures in the target language. However, Hymes (1972: 270) repudiated this statement that, from the learners’ point of view, all of us try to support them in learning the language.

Regarding Iraqi EFL learners in the secondary schools, their “communicative competence” is poor because they lack basic knowledge. This is acquired at an early age as English language teaching starts from the age of six. However, Hymes (1972) postulated that although the children have the ability to produce the language and learn it at an early age, they cannot produce the requisite grammatical structures.

The ideal teacher is one who runs the classroom well and recognizes, analyses, evaluates, and communicates with students using an appropriate educational method. In addition, he/she accurately observes the “individual differences¹ (ID)” between students to ensure a successful teaching process. From a psychological and learning point of view, Locke (ND), (cited in Kammash and Hassan 2018: 306) conducted various studies on individual differences. He inferred that a wider range of individual differences can be found in personal traits, and a more limited range in physical traits. Another set of important traits are those which relate to cognitive-mental abilities. In comparison with personal and physical traits, Bayley (1949, cited in Kammash and Hassan 2018: 306-307), considered them to be the most constant, especially at the end of early adolescence. These cognitive-mental abilities can be hierarchically organized as follows:

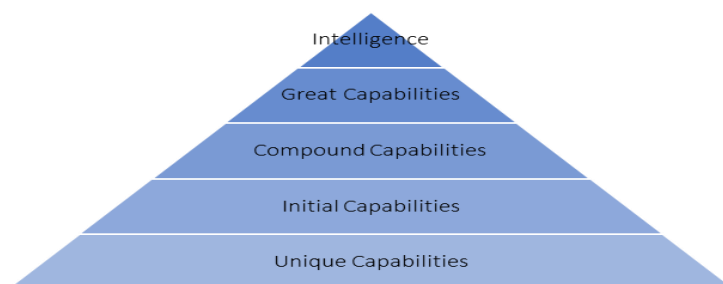


Figure 1: Hierarchical Organization of Mental abilities

The hierarchical organization of mental abilities shows that the intelligence trait is placed at the top. De Judicibus (2015: 1) defines “intelligence” as “totally objective, applicable to any individual regardless of context, and not influenced by the method used to measure it.” Learners have different mental abilities and thus differ in terms of levels of intelligence.

Concerning activities in teaching grammar, the use of activities to teach grammar helps to “raise grammatical consciousness and develop skills for reflection and self-assessment.” Grammatical activities enable teachers to select and practice the models that are grammatically appropriate. Furthermore, the purpose of enhancing grammatical efficacy is to stimulate “learners’ interest and sustain their attention in the long-term process of acquiring grammatical knowledge and skills in English.” Thus, pupils can sustain their interest in acquiring syntactic awareness and skillfulness in using English (Pennington 1995: x).

Furthermore, the role of the teacher who uses CA inside the classroom is that of a guider, an observer, a controller, a governor, and an orchestra leader. Thus, with respect to CA, educators have numerous roles, which are defined by Breen and Candlin as follows:

Within a communicative methodology the teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communicative process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts; the second role is to act as an interdependent participant within the learning-teaching group. (Breen and Candlin 1980/ 2002: 99)

These two roles are certainly important for teachers. Breen and Candlin's formulation encompasses the needs students require teachers to meet during the process of learning. Richards and Rodgers (2001: 167) also proposed several additional roles for which the teacher has responsibility, such as "needs analyst, counsellor, and group process manager". If the teacher performs all of these roles and learners do not cooperate, he/she will face a variety of difficulties when teaching. These difficulties will be discussed through the following section.

3. Difficulties in teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools (ISS)

Generally, teaching any subject at school cannot be free of difficulties. When teachers teach in Iraqi secondary schools, they definitely face numerous difficulties within the lesson. These difficulties can be summarized as follows:

- 1- Technological-educational tools: availability of technical-educational tools facilitate not only the process of teaching but also the process of learning. Powell and Powell (2004: 210) assert that "*technology* refers to the mechanisms used to facilitate or mediate the teaching-learning process." Technology is needed in educational systems as it helps the teachers to practice their job successfully as well as supporting learners. Powell and Powell (2010: 224-225) made a strong statement about the benefits of technology when they claimed that "technology is revolutionizing education and it is time to jump on board or stay in the dark ages." Accordingly, technology offers different advantages in the academic process as it steers the teacher from a dark to a light position.
- 2- Not having a computer: teachers who do not possess a computer are also likely to experience another difficulty when teaching, as computer technology plays an important role in the classroom. For teachers, there are several advantages in using a computer:
 - ✓ Saving time
 - ✓ Getting information to learners easily
 - ✓ Downloading educational programs from the web.
 - ✓ Dispensing with the use of other educational means.
- 3- Not having a TV screen: a TV screen is used to display programmes on the computer. Without it, these programmes are useless.

- 4- Not having a data show device: a data show device is required in the classroom to facilitate the teaching process, especially when there are educational programmes that need to be shown.
- 5- Non availability of electricity: if electricity is not available, teachers will face immense problems when they need to show programmes and prepare copies of papers for learners.
- 6- Hot weather. The hot weather affects both teachers and students as it makes it harder for learners to concentrate and hear the teacher's explanations.
- 7- Not having phonetic laboratories: when teaching the English language, phonetic laboratories are needed to facilitate the teaching and learning process.
- 8- Scholastic troubles: sometimes there may be difficulties between the teacher and headmaster, other members of the teaching staff, and so on. This may have a negative impact on the teacher that creates difficulties in the lesson.
- 9- School location: the location of the school is important for teachers, especially if it is far away from the teacher's residence.
- 10- Lack of experience: this can be a serious issue, as lack of experience can lead to poor class management.
- 11- Inadequate board: if the board is not fit to write on either with a chalk or a marker, this will cause a problem for teachers. Also important is the availability of a blackboard/ whiteboard eraser.
- 12- Not having a smart board: if teachers have a smart board, the teaching process becomes easy as it saves time, there is no need to rely on other educational tools, and no need to use a marker or chalk.
- 13- Large number of students: a large number of students inside the classroom means that the teacher will face a substantial difficulty in teaching as well as students in learning. The following photograph illustrates this issue:



Image 1: *A large number of students in an Iraqi classroom²*

In this photograph there are more than 80 learners in the class. This calls into question how the teacher will teach and indeed how learners will learn.

14- Lack of time: time is regarded as the most important factor in the teaching system.

15- Lack of language proficiency: language is the main tool in communicating with learners in the class, especially for teachers who are new. Without language control, class management may suffer.

16- Low level of ability: if the ability level of students is low, they will only be able to absorb ideas from the teacher slowly. This will make the process of teaching difficult for the teacher.

17- Personality: personality is a fundamental factor for teachers as it will determine whether they are able to control matters inside the classroom or not.

Thus, the presence of all these factors indicates that teachers will encounter a large number of difficulties that leave them open to criticism from learners and others directly associated with them. Consequently, the teaching process will be confusing for teachers even if they use the communicative approach or other methods in the class. This will then have a negative impact on learners.

This section will summarize the conclusions thus far. Teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools is based on the use of a communicative approach as stipulated in the English curriculum for Iraqi secondary schools. It implies an obvious grammatical curriculum. The primary goal of the communicative approach is to develop the communicative competence of the learners and to provide them with various opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned about the subject through communication. The purpose of developing communicative competence is to provide learners with the knowledge of a foreign language as well as the ability to use that language. In so doing, it enhances the grammatical competence of learners and provides them with a great amount of information about grammatical structures.

Teaching grammar in the secondary stages is often difficult. It requires a high level of professionalism, especially among teachers who are new to teaching. Teaching grammar involves using the language communicatively, so that there should be an interaction between the teacher and the learners to master the target topic. Teachers and learners both need high proficiency to overcome the difficulties that face them in the process of teaching and learning grammar. In addition, continuous tests must be conducted to enable students to demonstrate two features: "knowledge of language and an ability to use the language." Mastering these two features will show that learners have a level of knowledge that enables them to learn the grammatical patterns communicatively during class.

Additionally, the use of grammatical activities to teach grammar helps teachers to select and practice the models that are grammatically appropriate. In the teaching process, the teachers' role is to facilitate the communicative process between all participants in the classroom, and the approach of these participants to various

activities and texts; the second role is to act as an interdependent participant within the learning-teaching group, in addition to other roles as described above.

Finally, in teaching grammar using the Communicative approach, teachers face various difficulties (as described earlier) inside the classroom which lead them to use other teaching methods. This will be discussed in details through the next section.

4. Using other methods

It was apparent that aside from Communicative Approach (AP), teachers employed other teaching methods in order to meet students' needs when learning grammatical structures. Thus, their aim is to make the learning process as easy as possible by observing student's styles and strategies of learning. The other methods they used are as follows:

4.1. Grammar-Translation Method

Grammar-Translation Method can be defined as a method that “focuses on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts, doing written exercises”, Brown (2007: 26). Brown's definition explains Iraqi EFL learners' needs with respect to learning grammatical structures. Iraqi teachers employ this method because they believe it is the most preferable method for learning English grammatical structures. It is the favorite method of both teachers and learners. For teachers, it pays special attention to grammatical constructions, while for students it has a specific focus on translation that motivates them to understand what is going on when they are learning a language. The ‘Grammar-Translation Method’ has long been used in teaching. Some linguists have characterized it differently, with Stern (1983: 402) describing it as a “Traditional Method”, Richards and Rodgers (2001: 5) labelling it the “Prussian Method”, Brown (2007: 26) calling it the “Classical Method”, Celce-Murcia (2014: 4) the “Grammar-Translation Approach” and Doeur (2014: 51) the “Grammar-Translation Style and Traditional Teaching Approach”. All acknowledge that this method has been applied for centuries. It has been applied in teaching a second language (L2) where the students are more focused on the L1 than on L2. The L2 is interpreted as an “interlanguage” which is assimilated with reference to using L1, i.e., in translation. Thus, from a learning perspective, Stern (*Ibidem*: 402- 403) proposed that learners, in a methodical system, promote L2 based on their L1 because it is considered the basic system for mastering the L2. He (*Ibidem*: 455) also points out that “the first language is maintained as the reference system in the acquisition of the second language”, whereby the translation from L2 to L1 is used as a basis for acquiring the L2. This is an extremely important process used to motivate learners to learn the L2 quickly.

The GTM has several advantages with regard to facilitating learning and enabling learners to learn grammatical structures. Richards and Rodgers defined these as follows:

it views language learning as consisting of little more than memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign language; the sentence is the basic unit of teaching and language practice; grammar is taught deductively in which it is practiced through translation exercises. (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 5)

In using the GTM, learning is not based on mental abilities that help students remember the grammatical constructions so that they can tackle the L2 structures syntactically and morphologically, it is based on translation from L2 into L1. However, this will lead to students becoming confused about the differences between the L1 and L2 structures and as a result the students being unable to deal with the difficulties they encounter when learning.

Thus, the “Grammar-Translation Method” is used widely by teachers of the English language in Iraqi secondary schools. It is the dominant method in teaching grammar classes in particular and in teaching in general in cases where grammatical structures are the essential activities in the course from the very start up until the present day. The GTM focuses on grammatical structures that are based on translation from the L2 into the L1 to facilitate the learning process. In this case, the dominant language inside Iraqi EFL classrooms is the mother tongue, which means learners are unable to communicate with their colleagues inside the classroom using the target language. Consequently, they will find it difficult to learn the grammatical structures. Therefore, when teaching grammar, the schoolteachers use not only the GTM but also another method, known as the Direct Method (DM).

4.2. Direct Method

The Direct Method is, like the GTM, an old method used in teaching language. Richards and Rodgers (2001: 11) classified it as the “Natural Method”. They (*Ibidem*: 11) define the DM as taking language rules that are natural as the basis for language teaching. Although this method also uses translation and the mother tongue in teaching, they contend there is no need to do so “if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action”. Thus, the sense of utterances can be conveyed through extensive explanations and the practicing of exercises which enables learners to grasp the language without the need to practice translation or use the mother tongue.

Iraqi EFL learners who have used translation through GTM have become confused between the use of the mother tongue and the use of the target language. This makes it difficult for them to learn the target language structures. Consequently, their learning is sluggish and cumbersome as they do not have adequate knowledge of the language. Iraqi teachers therefore apply different methods in the classroom to meet their needs. Thus, at the beginning of the lesson the teacher is the predominant person whereas before the lesson ends, they tend to use the Indirect Method where learners share information in the class.

4.3. Indirect Method

The Indirect method (IM) means that the dominant role in learning the language during the class is played by learners, who run the lesson while the teacher acts as a guide. This is the opposite of the direct method. Thus, the direct-indirect system is like the turn-taking role in speech, where the lesson starts with the teacher and ends with learners explaining the grammatical structures. For example, the teacher starts to teach the grammatical rule by using different examples based on the patterns he/she intends to explain and sharing this with students a little bit to inspire them to be keen on learning. It also prepares them to run the lesson as he/she is aware that their turn will come at the end of the lesson. The aim of this activity is to show the students a particular issue and stimulate them by asking different questions using the board. He/she asks the students to provide answers to these questions. Additionally, teachers want students to overcome their fear/hesitation of speaking or carrying out any activities in front of their colleagues as well as encouraging them to use language when communicating. In this case, students are dominant persons inside the classroom and the teacher's role is that of a facilitator.

Thus, the purpose of the IM is to elicit students' understanding, their grammatical recognition, their mental abilities, and their cognitive differences to facilitate the learning process; to identify the difficulties they face during the learning process, and, finally, to train them in how to deal with subsequent lessons.

To summarize, in addition to using the "Communicative Approach", teachers employ other methods to teach grammar. The reasons for doing so include: to facilitate the system of learning in which students are engaged; to enable students to acquire information easily; to qualify them to learn the foreign language; and, from a grammatical perspective, to overcome the difficulties that they confront throughout their learning. Finally, there are mental differences in the linguistic and scientific levels of students, especially in terms of intelligence, in their linguistic abilities, in their knowledge of language, and in their recognition of the subject.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion that we reached so far is that teaching English as a foreign language has acquired a genuine global role in facilitating progressive and practical development in meeting the life needs. Most of the difficulties students face when being taught the English language lie in differentiating the foreign language from their mother tongue.

Teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools using the communicative approach, which aims at developing the "Communicative competence" for learners, is extremely important and essential when learning a language. It is the dominant content in the syllabus and is preferred to other skills. Structurally, grammatical patterns which are transmitted in teaching and assimilated in learning *English* as a foreign language can also help in improving the mother-tongue. It is well-known that

teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools using the communicative approach requires high proficiency, especially for teachers who are new to the profession.

Generally, teaching grammar depends also on two constraints: the teacher's experience and the time. These two constraints are so important for Iraqi teachers because they facilitate the teaching process that helps learners to learn easily. Besides, teachers have to observe the individual differences between students that help them to run the teaching method successfully. Within teaching process, teachers should have both: linguistic competence and performance that assist them to manage their class in a right methodological way that serve the learners. Also, regarding teaching process, teachers' role inside the classroom is to facilitate the communicative process between all participants and to act as an interdependent participant within the learning-teaching group.

In teaching grammar in Iraqi secondary schools, teachers encounter a great number of difficulties which have negative effects on learners' acquisition process. In order for the teachers to overcome these difficulties, learners should have a level of knowledge that enables them to learn communicatively. As a final point, teachers employ other methods of teaching, in addition to CA, to facilitate the system of learning.

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¹ Dörnyei (2005:4) states that "individual differences refer to dimensions of enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree. Or, in other words, they concern stable and systematic deviations from a normative blueprint."

² Retrieved from: <https://almadaper.net/view.php?cat=210160>