Enhancing Young EFL Learners' Grammar Awareness

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Abstract

Owing to the developmental characteristics of young learners, it is neither appropriate nor effective to focus in their EFL lessons on the formal teaching of grammar. However, it is widely recognized that teachers can greatly contribute to the children's understanding of grammar by incorporating form-focused activities in fitting contexts. Such activities enable pupils to acquire basic sentence patterns. Moreover, they draw their attention to the correct forms while engaging them in meaningful communicative situations. This paper first briefly outlines various issues and concerns related to grammar teaching and discusses them in terms of their relevance in the young learners' classroom. Then, it analyses instructional activities used by two primary English teachers to raise their pupils' consciousness of specific grammatical structures by including form-focused activities. It examines how these teachers support their pupils' grammar awareness, how they assist them in noticing and practising language patterns, and how they respond to the learners' mistakes.

Keywords: *grammar awareness, young EFL learners, form-focused activities.*

1. Introduction

There have been pro-grammar and anti-grammar periods throughout recent history of foreign-language teaching. Haught and Crusan [4] maintain that "most researchers and teachers now agree that grammar teaching is necessary, though they may differ on the extent to which it should be taught". It is a well-established fact nowadays that in order to make the teaching and learning of grammar effective, it needs to be presented and practised in appropriate, meaningful and interesting communicative contexts. Focusing merely either on the accuracy of the produced forms or on expressing meaning without any attention to using the correct forms is not considered to be helpful.

When it comes to introducing grammar in primary lessons, most young-learner EFL experts agree that there is a place for it in children's foreign-language learning. [1] [2] [6] [8] One factor profoundly affecting primary grammar teaching is that it requires abstract thinking on the part of the learners. Developmentally, this stage does not usually occur until the age of 11; however, certain youngsters may develop abstract reasoning earlier. Some authors believe that even young children are capable of thinking about and discussing how language(s) work and that engaging them with grammar and introducing them to grammatical metalanguage enhances their ability to think in abstract terms. De Oliveira and Schleppegrell [3] claim that oral work is crucial in developing primary learners' second-language proficiency, and through engaging in meaningful talk about language children can build their knowledge about how language works. Their research shows that primary learners' consciousness about grammar rises when teachers use metalanguage to make connections between the language forms and the purposes for learning.

On the other hand, Lewis and Mol [5] advocate that there is no room in the very young learners' classroom for explicit grammar instruction while older young learners (aged 6-13) can profit a good deal from age-appropriate tasks and largely playful activities. Among the most fitting tasks they include input tasks (working with a text to find examples of a grammar structure), noticing tasks (activities which make children aware of the topic without explaining it) and awareness tasks (analysing language samples). By the same token, Cameron [2] urges not to rush into confusing technical rules and labels too early, but focus instead on giving pupils a sound basis in using the language while encouraging curiosity and discussion about patterns and contrasts. Templeton [7] proposes that grammar teaching should begin when young learners are about ten and have had several years of oral-aural exposure to the foreign language. He advocates the "first feel how a rule works and later become aware of it" principle for young learners which suggests that acquaintance with a language structure and certain experience with it should precede its conscious knowing. Teachers should incorporate discussions about how language works (in the pupils' L1, initially without using any standard metalanguage) to enable learners to notice language patterns or rules, and develop a feeling for what is right and what is not. Similarly, Brewster et al. [1] posit: "Although formal teaching of grammar is not usually a major objective in the young learners' classroom, teachers can most usefully contribute to children's understanding of grammar by using form-focused techniques in meaningful

and interesting contexts." Their recommendation for teachers working with primary pupils is to focus on "facts" (cannot be applied generally but need to be accepted as such, e.g. the plural of *foot* is *feet*, not *foots*) and "patterns" (can be used to generate new language, e.g. *My favourite colour/desert is blue/ice-cream*.). In addition to that, they consider the latter to be particularly confidence-boosting for young learners and significant in terms of engaging in purposeful communication. Patterns can be noticed and analysed by the pupils through guided support, but without a direct explanation from the teacher in so called discovery activities, e.g. comparing English to their mother tongue. Pupils are motivated to work out rules independently as a problem-solving activity. In addition to expanding their awareness of the target language, such activities arouse the pupils' curiosity about how languages work, and help them to advance cognitively.

2. Research: aim, methodology and findings

My research is motivated by the fact that there is a significant body of theoretical sources on the various approaches to teaching primary EFL grammar but only a few well-illustrated examples how to put them in practice while respecting all the principles. I am going to examine two grammar-focused classroom activities of two qualified and experienced primary English teachers (T1, T2) who implement the inductive approach to grammar teaching in their lessons in the Czech Republic. T1 teaches the third class (19 pupils aged 8-9) and T2 teaches the fourth class (14 pupils aged 9-10). In both groups most of the pupils have been learning English since their first class. In terms of grammar content, the pupils in both schools are regularly involved in form-focused tasks but so far they have only rarely explicitly discussed the grammar or the rules pertaining to the structures they are practising. The lessons were video recorded and analysed qualitatively. The aim of the analysis is to exemplify how the teachers observed assist their pupils in noticing and practising language patterns, and how they respond to their mistakes.

2.1 Asking questions: T1 working with class 3

T1 is aware of the importance of routines in teaching young learners and she starts her lesson with a song followed by a TPR warm-up sequence. The grammar-focused activity called *Asking questions* comes next and takes merely 3:15 minutes. Within this short period of time T1 asks her pupils a total of 28 questions (some of them are repeated or slightly modified in order to involve more pupils). Her questions contain the following structures:

- i) the verb *to be*: *How are you today? How old are you? Are you happy/sad? Are you afraid of spiders/snakes? Where are you from? What's your sister's name?*
- ii) the verb *have got*: *Have you got long hair? Have you got any sisters/brothers? Have you got a pet? Have you got a dog or a rabbit?*
- iii) the present tense of the verb *to like: Do you like oranges/potatoes/your mum?*

The pupils' responses are either full sentences (*I'm fine, I am from the Czech Republic*) or short answers (*Yes, I am, No, I haven't*). T1 often reacts to the pupils' answers, most of the time by repeating the answer verbatim (19 times in total) but in a few instances also briefly responding to it (*You are happy, I am afraid of snakes*), providing short positive feedback (*Hmm, Great, Very good, Excellent*) or using a combination of a response with short positive feedback (*You are happy, very good*). Nonverbally, she is smiling, nodding her head for approval, walking around the classroom to approach the learner being asked and through her facial expression appears to show genuine interest in her pupils' answers. Most of the pupils respond immediately and correctly. When they on three occasions slightly hesitate, she repeats the question and gives them more time to formulate their answer or prompts them slightly. When one pupil responds incorrectly to the question *Have you got a brother?* (*No, I don't*)*,* T1 writes the two short answer options on the board and asks the pupil the same question again to correct herself, which she does. The pupils are on task and they are obviously used to it as their routine.

2.2 Noticing and practising the structure *there is/there are*: T2 working with class 4

T2's English lesson begins with a seven-minute series of introductory activities which include a rhyme, answering questions (about the weather, days of the week and the absent pupils), singing a song, and practicing two tongue-twisters. Her grammar aim is to practice saying the structure *there is/there are,* and she introduces language awareness activities immediately after the warm-up sequence. It takes fourteen minutes and is immediately followed by a related writing task.

In the previous lesson the pupils learned a short rhyme[1]. They know it off by heart, and it serves as key input for the development of their awareness of the target structure. T2 first chooses five nouns from this rhyme (*house, room, cupboard, box, ghost*), writes them on the board, and asks the pupils to form the plurals, which had been the focus earlier in the year. Then, the class remembers the rhyme and recites it chorally while the teacher points at the words being said. From there she proceeds to a new activity by saying *I haven't got a dark box, I have got a red box* and asking the pupils to guess what is in her red box. She gives two full-sentence examples: *Maybe there is a pen in the box. Maybe there is a flower in the box.* When she is about to provide the third example, some pupils begin to suggest their own ideas (*fox, monkey*) and T2 includes one of them in her demonstration: *Maybe there is a monkey in the box.* Finally, she presents two examples including the plural emphasizing the form *are*: *Maybe there are two monkeys in the box. Maybe there are five dogs in the box.*

Then the pupils (P) start their turns. P1 says "fox" and T2 models the full sentence for him prompting him to repeat it. T2 repeats the sentence one more time when she confirms that *You are right, there is a fox in the box*. P2 contributes by saying *There are three elephant* (sic) to which T2 responds with a surprised voice *Three elephants in the box?* and having looked inside clarifies that *No, there are not three elephants in the box*. P3 does not get the structure quite right when she says *There is a box five dogs.* T2's merely recasts the sentence without making any notice of the mistake and then provides the answer *No, there are not five dogs in the box.* P4 is also unable to produce the structure correctly when he says *There are is the box in the blackboard*. In this case T2 prompts the pupil to say the sentence again by saying it together with him and pointing at the blackboard to assure its proper placement in the sentence. P5 confidently contributes with *There is a monkey in the box.* P6 starts her sentence *There is a box scissors*. T2 cannot quite hear and her reaction is that she starts the sentence again saying *There is a…* and adding in the pupil's mother tongue that the following word must be a thing. P6 self-corrects herself saying *There is a scissors in the box.* Having realized what P6 had meant to express T2 then offers the right form *There are scissors in the box*? *No, sorry, no scissors in the box.* P1 then has his second turn in which he produces a whole sentence and self-corrects himself immediately *There is a box chalk, chalk in the box.* T2 again recasts the sentence and looks in the box to provide P1 with the answer. The guessing is followed by inviting individual pupils to come and have a look at what the box contains. P7 takes out two rulers, P8 a ball, P6 a book, P7 takes out three pencils, P9 a rubber and P10 a glue. T2 prompts the whole class to make the corresponding sentences. In order to support her class, she usually starts the sentences together with the pupils, and then points to the right objects to help them with the correct word order. During the activity she additionally makes little comments which include the target structure such as *Maybe there is a snake – be careful, There are two more things in the box*. She frequently gives short positive feedback such as *perfect, well done*, *good work*.

3. Discussion

The analysis of the two activities reveal that T1 uses asking questions regularly as part of her routine. Her pupils are able to respond correctly with full sentences or short answers, using language structures long before studying them explicitly and learning the terms denoting them. She provides reassuring and occasionally corrective feedback (namely verbal or written prompts), which is also done by T2 in the second activity. Both T1 and T2 encourage self-correction. T2 has designed an activity aimed at noticing a grammatical pattern followed by accuracy-oriented tasks that offer structuring opportunities. First, she makes use of a rhyme containing the target items to help the pupils get their tongue round the structure. Then, she clearly presents the structure and stimulates pupils to use it likewise. The pupils' turns give her ample opportunities to provide various forms of feedback and draw their attention more closely to the target form. Finally, we have seen that she consciously uses visual support (objects, miming, pointing, facial expressions) and enriches her input by making natural comments throughout the activity using the target structure. Both teachers are what Cameron [2] calls "grammar-sensitive", i.e. aware of language patterns occurring in various primary activities and familiar with techniques that enable pupils to notice and practise them.

4. Conclusion

I believe that this study has contributed to the view that in the young learners' context, a foreign language should not be taught as a set of rules but holistically, in clusters or chunks with occasional

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[1] *In a dark dark wood there is a dark dark house, in the dark dark house there is a dark dark room, in the dark dark room there is a dark dark cupboard, in the dark dark cupboard there is a dark dark box, and in the dark dark box there is a ghost.*

attention paid to points of grammar. For the ultimate success, young learners need to be surrounded by and engaged in meaningful foreign-language discourse. It is the responsibility of their teachers to consider language use from a grammatical perspective and draw on the fact that many types of common primary discourse can be fruitfully implemented and exploited for grammar learning.

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