Approaches to teaching grammar and vocabulary

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Abstract. Grammar and vocabulary are crucial components of language teaching, as vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of language proficiency and provides a large number of the foundations for how well language learners speak, listen, read, and write. Furthermore, grammar is also a vital aspect of language teaching, and learners' language development will be severely limited if they lack an adequate understanding of grammar. Hence, students cannot ignore the significance of acquiring vocabulary and grammar. The teacher plays a key role in teaching procedures, and it is significant for students that the teacher chooses and utilises appropriate approaches in teaching activities. In this study, I will illustrate some teaching approaches for teaching grammar and vocabulary, describe how to combine teaching approaches with activities from my teaching experience, and then mention some essential knowledge I have acquired by referencing relevant literature. I will read a large number of books, e-books, and journals in order to effectively analyse this paper. In summary, when teaching grammar, the task-based approach can be used for controlled activities, and utilising pairwork grammar activities in classes can also increase the fun and reduce peer pressure. Furthermore, younger students can be taught simple vocabulary through playing games. On the other hand, teachers can teach advanced students how to guess the meaning of unknown words based on their context and how to use dictionaries. Consequently, teachers must select appropriate approaches to teaching for learners of varying levels, and teaching approaches serve as a guide. The goal of using these approaches in activities is to assist students in acquiring grammar and vocabulary knowledge more effectively. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to understand how to efficiently use these approaches when teaching and what kinds of activities can help them achieve their teaching objectives according to specific teaching approaches.

Keywords: the grammatical feature, the grammatical structure, pairwork, prefixes and suffixes, explicit instruction, the task-based approach

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to define grammar and vocabulary and analyse approaches to teaching grammar and vocabulary. In addition, I am going to do critical thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of these teaching approaches in primary EFL classes. The reason why this topic has been researched is that the role of grammar and vocabulary are important issues in language teaching. This means that if students know the grammatical rules of the language, they will be able to use it for communication [8]. In addition, vocabulary is a core element of language proficiency and provides a large number of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write [8]. Without remembering extensive words and strategies for knowing new words, students usually cannot understand when they listen to

native speakers or listen to the radio. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to know how to use these approaches effectively in classes and what kinds of activities can reach the teacher's target according to specific teaching approaches.

In order to identify the various merits and demerits, the research will answer the following questions:

1. What is the definition of grammar and vocabulary?

2. What are the advantages of the teaching approaches that I mentioned, and what kinds of activities did I use according to these teaching methods in primary EFL classes?

3. How to choose and use these teaching methods in activities?

2. Literature review

I am going to briefly define grammar and vocabulary, illustrate some teaching approaches to teaching grammar and vocabulary, and describe how to combine teaching approaches with activities from my teaching experience. Then I will mention some important knowledge that I have learned, referring to relevant literature. Moreover, in order to analyse this paper well, I am going to read a large number of books, e-books and journals.

3. Approaches to teaching grammar

3.1 The definition of grammar

Grammar is about the generalisable patterns of the language and learners can construct new phrases as well as master grammatical features to express a precise meaning. People consider that the role of grammar is an essential aspect of language teaching and learners' language development will be seriously constrained if they do not have a good knowledge of grammar [8]. Hence, learners cannot ignore the importance of grammar, and as teachers, what points of grammar they choose to teach depend on their circumstances and learners' aims. Whatever the situation, teachers must make sure they are teaching only the points of grammar that they need to in light of these factors. And then teachers can have a better chance of teaching English rather than just grammar if they can focus clearly on some principles [5].

3.2 Two approaches for teaching grammar (task-based approaches)

Now, two main approaches for teaching grammar are referred in this paper. In the first place, task-based approaches to teaching grammar are essential methods for teachers to master in classes. This means that learners acquire the knowledge of grammar through completing a series of tasks instead of a predetermined grammar syllabus [8]. There are some reasons to explain the merits of applying this method. To start with, the use of tasks can engage learners in meaningful interaction and discussion focusing on the achievement of a task. In addition, learners' grammar needs are determined on the basis of task performance. Moreover, task work can give learners some suggestions after having completed the task [8]. Furthermore, by using task work in language teaching, the assumption is that learners will enhance their communicative skills while maintaining an acceptable standard of performance.

Simultaneously, task work is not done in order to improve the development of a nonstandard form of English but is seen as an aspect of the process by which linguistic and communicative competence is developed. At the same time, teachers should have a clear understanding of the goals of grammar-focused intervention because a large number of different processes are included in language classes as well as various stages in the learning and teaching process. DeKeyer considers that teachers should teach students about the rules of grammar and let students do different kinds of exercises about grammar, and then students can understand the target language with fewer errors and less mental effort [8].

3.3 Using task-based teaching approaches in my classes

From my teaching experience, I taught grammar through the task-based teaching approach in primary EFL classes. I need to admit that this teaching method is beneficial to students, and I can get feedback immediately on whether they understand the knowledge of grammar in the class or not. For instance, after teaching a specific grammatical feature, I gave students a task, like some handouts that included some forms they needed to fill out according to the questions, and then they handed them in. Finally, I checked the answers for all of the students, and I would know whether their performance of the grammatical structure was correct or not. For me, I would illustrate the target grammar again and let them do other exercises to master the knowledge completely. I think, as a teacher, the most important point of grammar teaching is to help students master the structures that teachers teach, and then students can use them in daily communication. In order to acquire knowledge of grammar, learners need opportunities to practice the structures. In reality, the aim of exercises is for learners to master the structures completely. All in all, the task-based teaching approach is not only good for students to acquire knowledge through achieving a task by themselves but also beneficial to teachers to check whether they reach the teaching goal.

3.4 Critical evaluation

In fact, there are some disadvantages to using the task-based teaching method. For example, this method does not provide an incentive for structural change towards an interlanguage system with greater complexity. However, as teachers, using the task-based teaching approach can bring more benefits to classes. Firstly, the learners are required to produce sentences containing the targeted feature. Secondly, the learners will be provided with opportunities for repetition of the targeted feature. Thirdly, there is an expectation that the learners will perform the grammatical feature correctly. Hence, practice activities are 'success-oriented' [9]. Fourthly, the learners receive feedback on whether their performance of the grammatical structure is correct or not.

3.5 Pairwork grammar activities

Pairwork grammar activities are useful in primary EFL classes, and there are quite a lot of pairwork activities suitable for learners around the elementary or pre-intermediate levels. For instance, learners make sentences and questions in a range of tenses (which you can point out in the task instructions). In fact, the activity's level is self-grading. In addition, they will not master some language items if they do not understand them. Ultimately, the basic activity includes pairs looking at a picture and making sentences, passing on the sentences to another pair and receiving another pair's sentences (about a different photo) themselves. Every pair

tries to recreate the other pair's original picture from the information they have received. Finally, students can practice the target knowledge of grammar through repeated training and then master the knowledge after the class.

3.6 Using pairwork grammar activities in my classes

In China, I taught primary school students before, and I usually used pairwork activities to let students do grammar exercises. Specifically, I taught the target knowledge of grammar. During this period of teaching grammar, I talked for a longer time while students listened to me carefully. However, they did not have more opportunities to practice and I also could not get real feedback from them. Thus, I managed to get students to do pairwork and I could check whether they mastered the grammar. For instance, I remembered teaching them about the past tense. Learners made sentences according to some pictures that I had prepared for them. I taught them 'verb+ed', and some key words like 'yesterday', 'the day before yesterday', and 'last month' are totally mean the sentence needs to be in the past tense. Next, I ask some questions in a range of tenses to check whether they have mastered the difference between a series of tenses. Ultimately, I managed to get students to do exercise in pairs, and they looked at a picture and made sentences, passed on the sentences to another pair, and then received another pair's sentences. Every pair tried to recreate the other pair's original picture from the information they had received. Therefore, they could totally master the grammar that I had taught.

3.7 Critical evaluation

This method has some merits. First of all, this is beneficial to students with lower levels, and it also brings great fun during the period of practice. Next, there is less pressure from peers in pairwork than from teachers, and all students can take part in pairwork at the same time. Nonetheless, pairwork grammar activities may last a long time if all students join in, and it is not easy for teachers to manage the whole class. In spite of that, pairwork grammar activities also benefit students, especially learners in primary school. Therefore, I think that pairwork grammar activities are more suitable for students who are language beginners.

4. Approaches to teaching vocabulary

4.1 The definition of vocabulary

Vocabulary typically refers mainly to single words (e.g., cat, red, run) and sometimes to very tightly related two- or three-word combinations (e.g., stock market, go off). In addition, learners who can recognise the communicative power of vocabulary might reasonably aim to acquire a working knowledge of a lot of words. However, it is difficult for learners to remember the long lists of words and maybe some of the vocabulary that they remember is not suitable for their own sentences.

Actually, for beginners or students at the elementary level, using teaching tools like word cards, pictures, videos, or TV to do some activities can attract students attention. In addition, discussions, communicative activities, and role-play are excellent activities as well. Next, students try to match pictures to vocabularies in class, and they can use prefixes and suffixes to build new words from given vocabularies. Moreover, students can fill in crosswords, grids,

or diagrams, and they can fill in gaps in sentences. Thus, Liu and Nation (1985) advise that students guess the unknown word in context instead of only thinking of individual words [4]. In addition, Williams (1986) suggests using an overhead transparency with a circle around the unfamiliar term and arrows leading to related words to help pupils better understand it [10].

4.2 Using teaching materials to teach students in my classes

From my teaching experience, I could ask every student to do the exercise using some teaching materials, such as vocabulary cards, pictures, and videos. For example, I taught them new words using vocabulary cards, and then they practiced new words by playing games like matching vocabulary cards and pictures. In another one, I asked students to have a competition in small groups to find the answers, and then we checked the answers together. Ultimately, I manage students to have competition and answer questions in turns in order to acquire award points for the right answers. Moreover, I also use some exercises as source materials for a series of activities. For example, I ask students to compete through the new questions as a quiz between teams. In addition, I could help them check and compare answers as a whole class.

4.3 Critical evaluation

This approach is suitable for students with lower levels. In addition, students can have fun and do exercises until they master the grammar. Moreover, teachers can control the whole class in a good atmosphere because they can practice by playing some kinds of games. In conclusion, I think that depending on the students English level, it is important to choose suitable approaches and activities in classes.

4.4 Incidental learning, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development

Besides using teaching materials to teach vocabulary in primary school, for students who have more than three years of language learning experience, three approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning are more suitable, which are incidental learning (i.e., learning vocabulary as a by-product of doing other things such as reading or listening), explicit instruction, and independent strategy development. The incidental learning of words requires that teachers give students some opportunities for extensive reading and listening. Explicit instruction includes estimating the vocabulary students need to know, presenting vocabulary for the first time, illustrating word knowledge, and improving fluency with known words. Ultimately, independent strategy development includes practicing guessing from context and teaching students to use dictionaries. As we all know, knowing how to use dictionaries is crucial. However, there is little training time in most classes [2]. Generally, explicit instruction may be the best approach for starting and intermediate learners who have limited vocabularies. For teachers, they can suggest that students mark these unknown words that they try to guess [3]. Particularly if students decide to guess these words, they can follow a five-step procedure like that of Nation and Coady [1]. To start with, students should determine whether the unknown words exist or not. Next, students can look at the immediate context and simplify it if necessary. Then, they can look at some sentences near the unknown word. Furthermore, students can guess the meaning of the unknown word. Finally, they can check whether the unknown word is correct or not. Thus, teaching vocabulary through incidental, intentional, and independent approaches requires teachers to plan a wide variety of activities and exercises.

4.5 Teaching students how to use dictionaries and how to guess unknown words in the context

In my experience, I taught students how to use dictionaries and made them learn new vocabulary by themselves through independent strategy development. I found that students could spell new words faster than before and remember them for longer. In addition, they could spell some simple words when they listened to the tape. Moreover, I taught students to guess the meaning of the unknown words from contexts, and I found that they could understand these words in the context, and then they could check these unknown words using dictionaries. All in all, I found that students are more confident to study because they will know what they can do if they meet difficulties in learning new words or doing exercises through reading the context.

4.6 Critical evaluation

As we all know, some words have more than one meaning, so if students just remember vocabularies through reading word lists, they will not have the correct understanding of each word in context. In addition, reading these words that they have no idea about is difficult for them to understand and remember. This is the reason that students with lower levels may never have done extensive reading for pleasure [6]. Actually, the meaning of different forms of the word is closely related, so students can guess words [7]. This approach is suitable for students who are advanced learners rather than primary school students. Actually, students should decide whether the word influences our understanding of context. Afterwards, the learners need to try to see if the unknown vocabulary can be analysed into parts and to check whether the meaning of the unknown word can match the specific sentence and make sense, and then students can use a dictionary to confirm the meaning of the unknown word. Thus, using this approach in activities is suitable for advanced students.

5. Conclusions

The teacher plays a key role in teaching procedures, and it is important for students that the teacher selects suitable approaches and then uses these approaches in activities. Referring to teaching grammar, the task-based approach can be used in controlled activities. In addition, using pairwork grammar activities in classes can increase the fun and relieve pressure on peers. Whereas teachers can use teaching materials to teach younger students about simple vocabulary through playing some games. In addition, teachers can teach advanced students how to guess unknown words in context and check the meaning of the unknown word in dictionaries. Therefore, teachers need to choose suitable teaching approaches for students with different levels and teaching approaches are like a guide. Moreover, the aim of using these approaches in activities is to help students master the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary more effectively.

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