Effectiveness of Teaching for Grammar: Take Conditional Sentence Teaching Analysis as an Example

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Abstract: Conditional sentence is a key and difficult grammar rule for students in secondary school to learn. Also, how to teach students effectively to master the grammar rules and apply them to English learning is worthy of consideration for English teachers. After analyzing some specific teaching cases, there are two methods: focus-on-form and focus-on-forms that are widely used in most English teaching classes. Besides, by exploring and analyzing the typical teaching case of Miss Wong with a focus-on-forms teaching approach, the advantages and disadvantages of this grammar teaching approach, results, and influences will be presented. In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, another different teaching plan and process will be proposed with detailed steps, contents, and explanations.

1. Introduction

Teaching grammar is usually regarded as a challenging teaching task for teachers in Hong Kong, China or Chinese mainland. Also, it is not an easy task for students to learn. Teachers and students are usually disturbed by part of speech in context, which cannot create any practical functions (Neumayer, E. J., & Rutan, E. J., 1950). Meanwhile, some teachers always pay attention to grammar structure and ignore grammatical form. In this paper, I will elaborately analyze two teaching methods: focus-on-form and focus-on-forms according an English teacher, Miss Wong's pedagogical approach. Then a teaching procedure based on her approach will be designed to create another effective teaching process so as to improve students' awareness of learning grammar. At the end of the paper, a discussion based on two methods and the author's own idea will be presented. [10]

2. Explanation of Two Key Terms and Miss Wong's Teaching Approach

The two key terms: focus-on-form and focus-on-forms are popularly used among English teachers. Miss Wong adopted two of them to teach students in the class. In this part, the specific definitions of the two terms, Miss Wong's teaching approach and procedure of grammar lesson, and its result and influence will be elaborated.

2.1 Definition of Focus-on-form and Focus-on-forms

Focus-on-forms refers to an incremental approach to teaching grammar, expecting students to learn grammar through explicit instruction of language, which is based on a grammar structural syllabus (Ellis, 2016). Focus-on-form refers to providing some types of implicit instruction for learning grammar during communicative language teaching (Fotos, 1998, p. 301). The former is a traditional teaching approach, which includes presentation, practice, and production (PPP) from a structural syllabus (Ellis, 2016). That is a teacher-centered approach. However, The latter is a student-centered teaching approach, which emphasizes meaning first and involves meaningful communicative activities.[5] [6]

2.2 Description and Critical Evaluation of Miss Wong's Teaching Approach

According to Vogel, Severine P. (2010, p. 7), in deductive grammar lesson, the teacher moves the lesson from a general aspect to specific examples. The teaching methods and process of Miss Wong's reaching approach are as follows. Initially, she introduced the explicit grammar rules with four types of conditional sentences to students in the class. Then some application exercises like multiple choice, fill-in blank in sentences, and complete sentences are provided to students and asked them to complete within the allotted time (Ellis, as cited in Vogel, 2010, p. 7). After their completion, Miss Wong checked their answers and gave feedback on their presentation and expression. In the process, if some of the students cannot fully understand the knowledge, she will further elaborate those complex rules and structure them, which still gives students explicit guidance. Thus, Miss Wong's deductive teaching is a traditional focus-on-forms approach. Students can acquire "rule-based" ability in specific grammatical structures (Ellis, 2005) through the process of presentation-practice-produce. [13] [3]

2.3 Pros of Miss Wong's Teaching Effectiveness

Students have access to comprehensive input through the teacher's instruction of grammar rules, which automatically activate their built-in syllabus for learning (Ellis, 2006, p. 85). Therefore, Miss Wong's teaching approach can cultivate students' learned competencies (Krashen and Terrell, as cited in Vogel, 2010, p. 18). Meanwhile, Miss Wong gives students grammar lectures according to the teaching syllabus, which includes a comprehensive and clear description of English grammar (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, as cited in Ellis, 2006, p. 84). Those resources are valuable for students to internalize. Miss Wong also said she would provide corrective feedback on learner errors. This procedure can help teachers identify which part of grammar rules and structure should require special attention (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, as cited in Ellis, 2006, p. 86-87). To be honest, this method is time-saving and efficient for teachers to be prepared for teaching procedures. [4] [13]

2.4 Cons of Miss Wong's Teaching Effectiveness

Long argued the traditional teaching and examination approach isolating the language items, this procedure, which is based on structural language, was ineffective and outmoded (as cited in Fotos, 1998, p. 301). This isolation in grammar forms fails to develop the learners' ability to use forms communicatively (Pienemann, as cited in Fotos, 1998, p. 302). In addition, explicit grammar instruction cannot cultivate students' acquisition competence that is necessary for language learners, because it can be combined with their implicit knowledge of the target language (Krashen and Terrell, as cited in Vogel, 2010, p. 18). [6] [13]

Miss Wong's teaching approach is presented out of context. Students are given isolated sentences

to understand the grammar items and then some grammar exercises are provided for them, which hope to internalize their grammar knowledge. But, it also should be noted that it cannot provide students with developing procedural skills of being able to use language for communication (Nunan, 1998, p. 102). [11]

2.5 The Impacts of Miss Wong's Teaching on Students

Miss Wong gave students four types of conditional sentences for instruction, which hopes to help them understand the target language. However, to some extent, Miss Wong has not required the production of output of students, containing the grammar form (Ellis, as cited in Fotos, 1998, p. 305). That is, this type of instruction makes students understand conditional sentences with difficulty. Through Miss Wong's instruction, students can improve their accuracy in understanding categories of conditional sentences, but they cannot understand how to use them in real practice even leads to the inappropriate use of lexical items (Muncie, 2002, p. 184). Miss Wong should transfer her focus from forms to form, which provides some type of implicit focus on grammar in communicative language teaching because the purpose of learning grammar is to promote accurate communicative language use through appropriate instruction on grammatical features (Fotos, 1998, p. 301). [6][9]

In her procedure, students are not given opportunities to explore the different grammar uses of conditional sentences by Miss Wong's explicit instruction. It will be difficult for them to know how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings. And her lesson fails to understand clearly between form and function. For instance, as Miss Wong said, students could not know why the past tense verb is used in if-clause. At that time, it needs to be supplemented by tasks that give students a chance to explore when it is communicated appropriately to use past tense verbs in if-clause according to the knowledge they have learned, instead of repetition of elaborating grammar rule that is not clear to learners (Nunan, 1998, p. 103). [11]

3. The Procedures of Teaching Conditional Sentence (Type 2)

Based on Miss Wong's teaching approach, an alternative teaching procedure with 35 minutes will be demonstrated as follows.

3.1 Stage 1: Pre-task

1) The teacher asks students to recall past grammar items: Simple past tense. (2 min)
2) Give a brief introduction on the new grammar item: Conditional Sentence. (2min)
3) The teacher sends handouts with two short essays (See Appendix 1 for doing exercise). Students are asked to think about their differences of them and are divided into several groups to communicate their findings and talk to the teacher about their views. (3 min)
4) After receiving their feedback, the teacher concludes what they said and introduces the expressive structure of conditional sentences (Type 2), which gives students a brief understanding of this grammar item. (3 min)

3.2 Stage 2: While-task

1) Explicit Instruction (6 min)
Firstly, the teacher tells students the purpose of using condition sentences (Type 2). It is used to describe imaginary and hypothetical situations. (Asking them to look at sentences in Appendix 1)
Secondly, the teacher uses one of the sentences in Appendix 1 as an example to tell students to

understand: if-clause is used to describe the condition. If-clause is a subordinate clause, which should be divided by using a comma. Then the main clause should be put after the comma. If if-clause is put after the main clause, the comma should be omitted.

Last point, the teacher should notify the past tense in if-clause and use of the word "would" in the main clause in three different tense expressions.

2) In order to see whether students can understand the usage of conditional sentences (type 2), another handout with several exercises will be distributed (see Appendix 2 on type two conditional sentence exercise). When they finish, they communicate with their partners about their answers. (5 min)

3) Teacher gives students the answers, which make them understand the information gap they have received and make corrections. (1 min)

4) The teacher asks students to raise their questions about conditional sentences (Type 2) and give them answers. (3 min)

5) In order to consolidate their knowledge, the teacher asks students to transfer the sentences in Appendix 3 to their group members and then ask one of them to write their view on the blackboard. (5 min)

3.3 Stage 3: Post-task (5 min)

The teacher gives a brief description about what they have written and asks several students to recall what they have learned in this lesson. Finally, the teacher gives a whole conclusion and assigns the homework for them to review what they have learned.

4. Theoretical Rationale of the Lesson

In general, this teaching procedure is mostly student-led. Students explore the new grammar item by cooperating with other partners and further understanding by teacher's instruction. It is a task that is used for providing a communicative focus on form (Fotos, 1998, p. 306). Students are provided with examples in context that illustrate the usage of target grammar items. Through this type of inductive grammar discovery task, their grammatical consciousness will be raised (Chan, 2008, p. 48). As the above teaching procedure mentioned, some conditional sentences (Type2) are demonstrated in the short essay, which makes students understand the basic structure of target grammar and improve their consciousness. In the following steps, some grammar exercises are also included. Those cooperative form-focused exercises in the teaching process make students understand different forms of grammar that allow them to make meanings of increasingly sophisticated rules, more importantly, to communicate their attitudes and views with each other (Nunan, 1998, p. 103). [6] [1] [11]

Long and Ellis suggested that focus on form, which refers to a focus on different concrete grammatical forms in the context is an essential component to raising learners' ultimate attainment (as cited in Cullen, 2007, p. 223). Therefore, the teacher begins a new grammar item with two comparative essays, making students understand the different grammar forms in these two essays. Meanwhile, some communicative activities are also applied in this teaching procedure and also express their opinions before the teacher gives their feedback and consolidation. Those output tasks: communicative activities and views expression push learners to use their complete grammatical resources and awareness-raising. After the teacher gives them instruction, learners can become aware of the gap in their current grammar knowledge, which is crucial to the pedagogy designer to provide the required focus on form (as cited in Cullen, p. 223). We can also see this benefit to students in exercise 2 where students can compare the answers with the teacher's corrective answers to understand how much they have acquired about this grammar item. This implicit instruction can

encourage students to unconsciously acquire grammatical forms through automatic processes (Seo, Sueyon, p. 20). [2] [12]

Generally speaking, this teaching design can also be understood as a planned focus on form, which uses some relevant exercises in communicative activities and asks students to finish them, then the teacher gives necessary guidance so that they can transfer their attention to form (Lin, Chih-chin, 2011, p. 37). In this teaching procedure, the teacher still gives a presentation and practice before or after the communicative activities (Littlewood, 2013, p. 3). The combination of instruction and activities can develop students' accurate use of target grammar structure and recognize the value of grammar usage in context (Fotos, 1998, p. 302). [7] [8] [6]

5. Conclusion

As outlined above, grammar for teaching is a complicated process for teachers to explore. Teachers not only need to facilitate learners' internalized language system by exploring grammar structure and rules but also promote their acquisition of language use (Fotos, 1998, p. 303). Focus-on-form is an effective approach to transfer students' attention to meaning-focused and form-focused learning. Explicit instruction cannot be ignored due to it can promote learners' understanding and consolidation of new grammatical items. Especially before the communicative activities, this suitable input can increase learners' grammar output (Vogel, 2010, p. 19). [6] [13]

To summarize, the most effective teaching method is to provide students explicit and implicate guidance with the involvement of communicative activities and form-focused exercises. The purpose is to improve students' ability in communicative language and accurate use in target language. But most teachers in Hong Kong, China or Chinese mainland still pay attention to grammar rule teaching and examination results, that is, they still use a focus-on-forms approach to teach grammar without form-focused and meaning-focused communication activities and exercises. Therefore, this prevalence of a combination of focus-on-form and focus-on-forms approach still needs a long way to go.

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Appendix 1- Exercises on Conditional Sentence (Type 2)

Look at the following two short essays, which were written by two students. Do you think which one is better? Find the difference and communicate with your partners. Pay attention to underlined sentences.

Essay one: If I were a teacher, I would not only teach my students knowledge but also teach them how to be successful people in this world. I would use different forms of teaching. I would try my best to make my lessons interesting. Besides, I would try to be their friend and help them with any questions they might encounter in their lives. If I were to become a teacher in the future, I would give my students more warmth and support. My mother feels sorry for herself because she missed a good chance to become a teacher when she was young. She always told me If she had become a teacher, she would have taught much more knowledge to her students. So, she also hopes I become a good teacher in the future.

Essay two: I want to become a good teacher in the future. I believe my method is different from my teacher's. I will become their best friend and listener. I will also give them support and help them with any problems. My mother could not become a teacher twenty years ago, she hopes I will become.

Appendix 2- Conditional Sentence Exercise (Type 2)

Fill in the blank
E.g. If I had ten million, I would buy a big house.
          ↑   ↑
If +_____ tense, would +_____.
Or.
_____+_____ + if+_____.
 ↑   ↑   ↑
I would buy a big house if I had ten million,

Multiple Choice
1. If I_____you, I _____ _____ hard.
A. was, will work B. were, will work C. were, would work
If he____ _____to my home, I would_____ _____ you.
have came, have tell B. had come, have tell C. has came, had told
If she ____ ____ arrive, her mother _____ _____ her.
were to, would accompany B. was, will accompany C. Had, would accompany

Appendix 3- Type Two Conditional Sentence Exercise for Activity 3

Look at the two types of sentences, and try to transfer the type1 to conditional sentences and the type two to simple sentences.
Type 1
I hope I can get good grades in English examinations by working hard.
I use ten million to buy a Porsche.
Mary will come to have a dinner with us.
Mary becomes very happy in a big party.
Type 2
If I had time, I would go to the park for walking.
If I were you, I would work hard.
If I had seen this film, I would have told you about it.
If he were to come here, he would tell us.