Focus on Form and Grammar Teaching:
Implications for EFL Contexts
การเน้นรูปแบบทางภาษาและการสอนไวยากรณ์:
แนวทางสำหรับการสอนไวยากรณ์ในบริบทการสอน
ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

    ในปัจจุบัน การศึกษาด้านการเรียนรู้ภาษาที่สองได้กลับมาให้ความสนใจ อิทธิพลของไวยากรณ์ต่อการเรียนรู้ภาษาที่สองอีกครั้ง หลังจากที่การเรียนการสอน ไวยากรณ์ลดบทบาทลงในช่วงที่การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเน้นด้านการเรียน ภาษาเพื่อการสื่อสาร เนื่องจากได้มีการศึกษาและพบว่าความรู้ไวยากรณ์เป็นปัจจัย ที่สำคัญในการพัฒนาภาษาที่สองและนำไปสู่การใช้ภาษาที่ถูกต้อง แต่อย่างไรก็ตาม ไวยากรณ์ในบริบทใหม่นี้มีการสอนที่แตกต่างจากการสอนไวยากรณ์ในแบบดั้งเดิม แต่อยู่ในรูปแบบที่เรียกว่า การสังเกตเห็นความผิดพลาดของไวยากรณ์ในบริบท งานวิจัยทางด้านการรับภาษาที่สองแสดงให้เห็นว่า การสอนไวยากรณ์แบบให้ ผู้เรียนสังเกตเห็นข้อผิดพลาดในบริบททำให้เกิดการพัฒนาทางด้านภาษาของ ผู้เรียน อย่างไรก็ตามการสอนวิธีนี้ยังไม่ค่อยนำมาใช้มากนักโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง ในบริบทการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ ดังนั้น วัตถุประสงค์ ของบทความนี้เพื่อสร้างความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับคำจำกัดความของการสอนไวยากรณ์ ในรูปแบบนี้ ข้อแตกต่างระหว่างการสอนแบบนี้และการสอนแบบเน้นไวยากรณ์

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และการนำการสอนแบบสังเกตเห็นข้อผิดพลาดในบริบทมาใช้ในการเรียนการสอน
ไวยากรณ์ในบริบทการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

คำสำคัญ: การสอนไวยากรณ์ การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ
การเน้นรูปแบบทางภาษา

Abstract

Roles of grammar in language teaching have been reconsidered. Once neglected in communicative language classrooms, grammar is now viewed as one crucial factor in improving learners' accuracy and language acquisition. However, grammar is no longer to be taught using a traditional grammar approach, but utilizing a new approach called focus on form. A number of studies in Second Language Acquisition reveal positive effects of focus-on-form instruction on learners' acquisition. Nevertheless, this has not yet been effectively transferred to language teaching, particularly in EFL contexts. This paper, therefore, aims at discussing grammar teaching and the notion of focus on form by considering diverse definitions of focus on form, the difference between focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs), the effectiveness of FonF on learners' acquisition, and the implications of grammar teaching for EFL teachers of focus on form.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, EFL, Focus on Form

Introduction

The roles of grammar instruction in an EFL/ESL classroom have been reversed. During the initial stage of language teaching under the Grammar Translation Method, grammar was the main focus of the instruction. The approach, however, fell out of favor as it was found inadequate to

prepare learners for actual communication. There was, thus, a shift to a more communicative approach to language teaching, which focused on providing learners with opportunities to use language for communicative purposes while concentrating on meaning of production. However, there were concerns that learners instructed in a communicative classroom may improve their language fluency, but may not improve their accuracy due to too much focus on meaning. Instead, they may be fossilized in their interlanguage. Focus on the grammatical aspect of language learning has thus resurfaced. This focus on grammar, however, is unlike the traditional grammar translation class (or focus on forms). Focus on Form (FonF) or attention to forms is a method where learners attend to form during meaning-focus communicative tasks. However, teachers who lack understanding and are left without practical guides on how to adopt the concept of focus on form in their language teaching may face issues with applying the method. This paper, therefore, is aimed to review the issues related to communicative grammar instruction under the concept of focus on form, particularly in EFL contexts for university-age learners.

The organization of the paper is as follows. First, the definition of focus on form will be discussed, followed by the reasons why focus on form is effective to learners' language acquisition will be described. Finally, the implications to EFL language teachers on grammar teaching, drawn from pedagogical decisions that teachers have to make based on Doughty and Williams' recommendations (1998) will be provided.

Focus on Form

Focus on form has been well documented as a crucial factor for language acquisition. There is a growing number of research studies showing the effectiveness of focus-on-form instruction including Doughty and

Varela (1998) using recasts, Iwashita (2003) using implicit negative feedback, Mackey (1999) using question formation, and McDonough (2004, 2005) using clarification requests. These studies showed that through negotiation and opportunities for focusing on form, learners improved their second language knowledge and moved toward more native like proficiency. However, since the definition of focus on form is sometimes mixed with other methods of grammatical teaching, the following part will be a brief overview of the definition of focus on form.

What is Focus on Form (FonF)?

Focus on form is sometimes mixed up with the term focus on forms. Focus on forms carries a traditional sense of teaching grammar. Under the focus on forms approach, learners learn grammar point by point in a linear string from easy to more difficult ones. Grammatical points are often pre-selected by the teacher; learners are supposed to learn them intensively. This approach includes methods and techniques such as grammar instruction, formal instruction, form-focused instruction, and code-focused instruction. While in focus on form, grammar is to be learned in a communicative meaningful context when there is a communication. However, the definition of focus on form is also diverse, ranging from very implicit to more explicit.

According to Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), FonF overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is no meaning or communication (Long, 1991, pp. 45-46) and often consists of occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or one or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production (Long & Robinson, 1998, pp. 23).

Based on the definitions of FonF given by Long and Long and Robinson, FonF falls at the end of the continuum of implicit instruction. FonF is driven by communicative demands. When there is a communication breakdown, students' attention is drawn to forms. According to Long, FonF occurs rather naturally where learners pay attention to form when there is a communication breakdown. In other words, when the interlocutor shows that he/she does not understand the message; this signifies to learners that there may be something wrong with their language (i.e., incorrect language). Trying to get their meaning across, learners have to modify their language (i.e., correct their mistakes) for the listener's better understanding. For Long, FonF is implicit and cannot be explicitly taught or planned in advance because FonF occurs naturally, and so negative feedback should be given when learners need it (i.e., during communication breakdowns).

However, Doughty and Williams (1998) see FonF and FonFs as not totally different. FonF instruction may involve FonFs in meaningful ways.

> Focus on forms and focus on form are not polar opposites in the way that 'form' and 'meaning' have often been considered to be. Rather, a focus on form entails a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on forms is limited in such focus, and focus on meaning excludes it. Most important, it should be kept in mind that the fundamental assumption of focus-on-form instruction is that meaning and use must already be evident to the learner at the time that attention is drawn to linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across. (p. 4)

Similarly, Ellis (2001) and DeKeyser (1998) state that FonF instruction includes both traditional and more communicative approach. FonF instruction can be delivered in either a planned or an incidental instructional

activity. The main concern is that FonF instruction must draw learners' attention to linguistic forms in meaningful contexts. However, parts of the definition of FonF given by Doughty and Willaims (1998), DeKeyser (1998), and Ellis (2001) are considered FonFs by Long who views that FonF occurs incidentally, not intentionally as in classroom lessons.

In sum, the definition of FonF is quite diverse. However, it is quite clear that FonF requires teaching grammar differently from the traditional grammar translation method. It focuses more on learning grammar meaningfully and communicatively in a meaning-focused activity based on Second Language Acquisition theories (i.e., opportunities to attend to form during meaning focus, to receive negative feedback, and modify one's language under meaning focus).

How FonF Helps Improve Learner Language Acquisition

FonF is grounded by two main hypotheses: the Interaction hypothesis and the Noticing hypothesis. The Interaction Hypothesis is proposed by Long (1985, 1991) to describe how children learn their first language. According to Long, interaction is a crucial factor that helps improve learners' acquisition. Learners can acquire a language when given a chance to interact with other people who may or may not be more proficient. Engaging in a conversation, learners will receive modified comprehensible input, test their hypotheses of the system of the language, practice, and produce their language meaningfully, and have a chance to negotiate. Through negotiation, they are given feedback which draws their attention to notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language and gaps in their interlanguage, leading to modification of their language.

In addition to the notion of interaction, FonF is widely accepted since it is grounded by the Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt

(1990, 1993, 2001). According to Schmidt, to acquire a language, learners must be able to consciously notice forms in the input together with their meanings and the gap between their interlanguage and the target language (i.e., what they do not know or what is missing in their interlangauge).

Long (1991, 1996) also states that attention to form will be most beneficial to learners if it occurs due to learners' needs when there are communication breakdowns. When learners' attention is drawn to linguistic features that are problematic to them in a meaningful context, it is likely that they will be able to notice the gap and may be pushed to produce output to modify their language and make it more understandable. As can be seen in the following example, A makes a mistake on the past tense. By receiving a negative feedback from B showing that there must be something wrong in his/her language, A modifies his/her language and uses a more correct form.

A: I go to Central Plaza last night.

B: You went to Central Plaza last night?

A: Yeah, I went to Central Plaza last night?

In sum, FonF is crucial for language acquisition because it may lead to learners' noticing the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, and the holes in their interlanguage. As mentioned earlier, a number of Second Language Acquisition studies have shown the effectiveness of FonF on second language acquisition (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Iwashita, 2003; Mackey, 1999; McDonough, 2004, 2005). Even though the findings of these studies seem to provide teachers with pleased information, teachers seem to be uncertain about how to implement FonF in their language class since most of the studies were conducted in ESL contexts (except McDonough, 2004, 2005) and when in

EFL contexts, they were implemented in lab settings, not a natural settings. In an attempt to transfer FonF into an EFL context, the following section will discuss on how to adapt FonF in EFL settings based on Doughty and Williams' discussion of decisions that teachers have to make when applying FonF into language class.

Implications of Focus on Form on Grammar Teaching in EFL Contexts

According to Doughty and Williams (1998), six pedagogical decisions concerning focus on form that teachers have to make are as follows.

Decision 1: Whether or not to focus on form

Decision 2: Reactive versus proactive focus on form

Decision 3: The choice of linguistic form

Decision 4: Explicitness of focus on form

Decision 5: Sequential versus integrated focus on form

Decision 6: The role of focus on form in the curriculum

Doughty and Williams discuss each point in different elements of focus on form including phonological, lexical, grammatical, and pragmalingistic aspects of language. Since the main focus of this article is on grammar teaching in EFL contexts for university-age students, the six decisions will be discussed in terms of how each element should be considered and applied in such contexts.

Decision 1: Whether or not to focus on form

Grammar is a crucial factor in learning a second language. Without grammar, learners will not be able to express meaning appropriate to the context and will not be able to clearly express themselves and make

themselves clear to other people they way they want (Larsen-Freeman, 2002). It is now well documented that the knowledge of grammar will help learners develop their interlangauge and help learners with long-term success (i.e., accuracy in their language production) (Spada & Lightbown, 2002). It may also help prevent learners from premature fossilization.

As mentioned earlier, FonF research has shown positive effects of FonF on second language acquisition. In particular, it provides learners with opportunity to notice gaps in his knowledge and modify his incorrect language and learners move toward to the target like form. As such, it is crucial for teachers to provide learners with opportunity for FonF by incorporating it into their instruction. To include FonF into instruction, FonF should be promoted in meaning-focused communicative tasks (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002). In other words, the main purpose of the tasks should not be on explicit learning of forms, but using forms to achieve the goal of the activity with attention to form when there are communication breakdowns. As such, tasks need to be designed and structured in such a way that they can raise learners' awareness and attention to form for linguistic acquisition (Richards, 2002). The notion of using tasks and structured tasks is supported by Williams (1999) who found in her study that structured activities can lead to more accuracy in learners' language.

Decision 2: Reactive versus proactive focus on form

There are two types of focus on form: reactive versus proactive. Reactive focus on form is based on Long's definition of focus on form. That is, attention to linguistic features is given when there is a problem in actual communication. For Long, the main focus of FonF class is the content of the language (e.g., biology, culture, mathematics, automobile

repair, etc.), and teachers react promptly to the grammatical mistakes incidentally occurring in the communication (Long, 1991). Proactive focus on form is that the teacher plans ahead that a lesson will contain focus on form (Richards, 2002). In proactive FonF classes, students are introduced to a grammatical feature and are involved in communicative and actual production activities focusing on the use of the grammatical point previously mentioned (e.g., simple past tense). During language production, students are given negative feedback on their incorrect use of the form (e.g., regular vs. irregular verbs, pronunciation of -ed endings). Considering different factors in EFL contexts, it may be hard for Long's optimal environment of FonF to occur, and proactive focus on form may be more appropriate. This is due to the following factors.

The first factor has to do with the class size. The size of EFL classes is large. In Thailand, there are approximately 30-40 students in one class. The only proficient speaker is the teacher; therefore, it is highly challenging for the teacher to provide reactive negative feedback to all learners' errors, which are quite random in nature. Most of the time students have to interact with their peers who may be unable to provide each other reactive feedback on form. If the lesson is planned to ensure that FonF will occur, it will be more effective and useful for students.

The second factor is the use of the first language in classroom. Different from L2 settings, where most of FonF research was conducted, in EFL settings, the amount of target language use is very low. Learners in this context are homogeneous in terms of their first language, educational background, experience, and so on. As a result, when in the classroom, it seems they understand they understand each other well even though their language is incorrect. As such, communication breakdowns are less likely to occur, limiting learners' opportunities to provide and receive

reactive feedback. Therefore, in EFL contexts, grammatical points should be proactively chosen and focused to be certain that students will receive benefits from the FonF activity for more opportunities for rule internalization.

The last factor is the prescribed curriculum. The curriculum, content, and textbooks have already determined by the institution or the educational system. The teacher has to follow the curriculum about the grammatical features that students have to learn and will be tested on. Moreover, in some EFL contexts such as in Thailand, teachers' English proficiency, particularly at primary and secondary schools, is very low. It is unlikely for teachers to provide reactive focus on form to learners. Therefore, planning ahead that a lesson will contain focus on form, or proactive FonF, may be more appropriate for EFL teachers (Richards, 2002). They will then be able to prepare a lesson that will focus on form that is required for learners to focus. In addition, they will be able to prepare effective feedback when communication breakdowns or problems occur.

However, we believe that there is room for reactive FonF in the already-planned activity. EFL teachers should look for opportunities to be reactive to FonF during the activity when they have a chance to. This should be done with considerations on learners' development stages and developmental readiness and also teachers' preparation for FonF.

Decision 3: The choice of linguistic form

Doughty and Williams (1998) claim that a needs analysis may not be sufficient to inform teachers about what linguistic features should be focused on during FonF activities. Following the arguments, they suggest that when selecting linguistic forms for proactive FonF, three factors should be considered: learners' development sequences and developmental readiness, the level of the difficulty of the grammatical structures

themselves, and the influence of learners' first language. The notion of developmental sequences and developmental readiness implies that teachers must have some evidence that learners have acquired a previous stage or show some signs of grammatical features in the previous state before introducing the form in the next stage. For example, teachers should not introduce learners to past perfect if learners are not yet capable of producing past tense (See Bardovi-Harlig, 1994 for detailed discussion). As we know that grammatical structures vary in terms of their difficulty levels. Some features are easy to learn, and some are more difficult depending upon the relationship between form and function. It is suggested that easy features should be first introduced to learners. In regards to L1 influence, linguistic features that should be chosen involve contrasts between L1 and L2 that may cause learning problems, and that should be the main focus of the class. Besides the three factors, two other elements need to take into consideration when choosing forms for FonF instruction are less salient features (Schmidt, 2002) and discourse-based approach (McCarthy & Carter, 2002). Schmidt states that when choosing features to focus upon, it may also be important to pay attention to features that are less noticeable to learners. In other words, to raise learners' awareness and attention to form, the form chosen should be those that learners are unlikely to notice on their own. For discourse-based approach, grammatical forms chosen to be taught in the classroom should help develop learners' skills and awareness of outside class language.

Decision 4: Explicitness of focus on form

One factor that needs to consider closely when deciding to include FonF instruction into classroom activities is whether focus on form should be carried out implicitly or explicitly. Implicit FonF instruction is derived

from Long's definition of FonF and incidental learning. However, Doughty and Williams (1998) through reviews of previous explicit instruction studies show that explicit instruction was more effective than the implicit one, and roles of explicit instruction on second language learning should not be overlooked. This is especially true in an EFL context. In EFL contexts, learners expect to learn grammar in the classroom, or they will feel that they learn nothing (Fotos, 2000). Moreover, in their meta-analysis study, Norris and Ortega (2000) found that explicit instruction was indeed more effective than implicit instruction. This may be due to the fact that explicit instruction can raise learners' attention to form and meaning in the input (Schmidt, 2001). Despite this fact, Doughty and Williams propose that there is also room for implicit FonF instruction because implicit FonF instruction provides "opportunities to trigger acquisition processes" (Skehan, 1996 cited in Doughty & William, 1998). This in turn will help learners notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, and may lead to language acquisition.

In addition, implicit techniques suggested by Doughty and Williams (1998) may also be useful to EFL learners. These include input flood and the use of tasks in which the grammar which is the target point is essential for successfully completing the tasks. Moreover, the implicit instruction can provide a way for meaning-focused language sue in the classroom (Fotos, 2002). Nevertheless, metalinguistic talk may not be beneficial to EFL learners as it to ESL learners because their accuracy problems stem from rather different sources. ESL learners have achieved a certain level of language fluency since they are exposed to a lot of input outside the classroom, but they still have some problems with accuracy. As a result, discussing the grammatical point explicitly will help them gain better understanding of how the system of the language works. Conversely,

EFL learners are not yet capable of producing language fluently. They are at the stage of testing their hypothesis about how the language works; therefore, explicit talk about the rules may not be as useful to them as giving them positive evidence in the input flood and structured tasks.

Decision 5: Sequential versus integrated focus on form

FonF instruction includes three elements: forms, meaning, and function or use (Doughty & Williams, 1998). To focus on form is to draw students' attention to form in a meaningful context. In other words, the understanding of meaning and form must be connected. Doughty and Williams summarize three possible models for FonF instruction to connect forms, meaning, and function (see Table 1). According to Doughty and Williams, only the first and third models are appropriate for FonF instruction. However, in my opinion all three should be appropriate for EFL contexts and can be beneficial to EFL learners, taking into account learners' proficiency levels. This is due to the fact that learners' language proficiency has a great effect both on the amount that learners can focus on as regards form and the types of forms on which they can focus (see Leeser, 2004; Williams, 1999). According to Table 1, Model 2 is appropriate to beginning learners, while Models 1 and 3 are more appropriate with learners with higher language ability.

Table 1: Instructional Models and Learners' Proficiency

Model (Doughty & Williams, 1998)	Learners' language proficiency (adapted from Brown's stages of language development (2000))
Model 1: Forms → FonF approach - brief, explicit instruction of formal language - FonF activities with signals and brief intervention	Intermediate: mastery some forms but their grammar knowledge has not been systematic yet.
Model 2: Forms-then-FonF sequence - explicit instruction of formal language - time for the learner to grasp the declarative knowledge - extensive practice of forms in controlled behaviors, using declarative knowledge as a crutch (leading to procuduralization)	Beginning: have little knowledge of how language works.
Model 3: Form and meaning at all time - attention to form and meaning integrated at all times, with or without explicit instruction	Advanced: their knowledge of grammar is more systematic.

Considering Brown's stages of learner language development (2000), Model 2 (Forms-then-FonF sequence) is appropriate for EFL beginning learners. Contrast to Ellis (2002) who states that grammar should not be taught explicitly to beginning learners, I do believe that grammar is appropriate to beginning EFL learners because they need it for their EFL development. Williams (1999) found that beginning learners are not capable of focusing on form even when they were encouraged to. This might be due to the fact that learners do not have sufficient knowledge

to focus on form and modify their language. Learners at this level have learned some English rules, but they have only little knowledge of how the system of the language works. Without explicit instruction, they may not have any sources to rely on to modify their language. Moreover, being forced to participate in a meaning-focused activity and being required to focus on form may lead to learners' frustration and lose of confidence. Receiving explicit instruction and extensive practice as the second model provides, learners may be capable of attending to form, noticing the gap, and modifying their language when receiving negative feedback.

Intermediate learners may gain more benefit if instructed under the approach in Model 1 (Forms—FonF). Learners at this level have partial knowledge of how the system of the language works; their knowledge is not systematic yet (Brown, 2000). They are unlikely to need extensive explicit instruction on rules. Brief explicit instruction, however, may remind them about the maim issues of the grammatical points, which are the focus on the lesson. This may help arise their awareness and attention on form that will be focused upon in communicative tasks when they are given negative feedback.

Finally, EFL advanced learners may benefit more from Model 3 (connection of form and meaning at all times). These learners are capable of producing language and can make themselves understandable to others. Their knowledge of the structure of the language is more systematic. They are capable o f modifying their language. In addition, they have sufficient knowledge to focus both on form and meaning at the same time. Learners at this level can pay attention to form even in more meaning-focused activities since they have enough knowledge sources to draw upon.

Decision 6: The role of focus on form in the curriculum

In EFL contexts, teachers are normally asked to teach and follow the already-designed curriculum in terms of content, skills, evaluation, and so on (Fotos, 2002). Grammar is normally taught in a traditional way, which uses explicit instruction and extensive practice, even though teachers claim that they are using communicative approaches (Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2010). In such classroom, students are rarely provided opportunities to use the target grammatical point in meaningful situations and to receive appropriate feedback to enhance their acquisition. Even in theme-based classroom, grammar is sometimes taught separately and not related to the content. In some classes, learners learn one grammatical point without having a chance to use it again the rest of the semester; in some cases, grammar is left out because the teacher wants to focus more on fluency than accuracy.

According to Doughty and William (1998), research showing the long term effectiveness of FonF are comprised of two main features: integrated attention to meaning and focus on form continuing beyond short and isolated treatment period (see e.g., Bardovi-Harling & Reynolds, 1995). Doughty and Williams, therefore, suggest that FonF instruction should be included into the whole part of a curriculum to ensure the effectiveness of FonF and the enhancement of learners' language acquisition. They also propose three curriculum options (see Figure 1). To choose the best type of curriculum, teachers and curriculum developers should keep in mind different factors including learning context (availability of input and classroom constraints), learners (age, proficiency, educational background, and educational goals), forms (inherent characteristic, status in interlanguage), and learning processes to be engaged (noticing, restructuring, hypothesis testing, and automatization). For EFL contexts, we think it is very challenging

for teachers to adapt and/or adopt the suggested curricular to most fit their context and factors. However, it is worth trying and can be rewarding at the end.

Curriculum Option 1
A.   Presentation of rules → development of declarative knowledge
B.   Reflection → proceduralization
C.   Controlled practice → anchoring of declarative knowledge
D.   Fluency practice → automatization
Curriculum Option 2
A.   Input → processing meaning
B.   Input processing → intake of formal features
C.   Output → fluency
Curriculum Option 3
A.   Pre-emergence: implicit techniques (e.g., flood or input enhancement) → noticing
B.   Emergence: selection of appropriate techniques, that is more explicit techniques (e.g., focused feedback) → noticing the gap or hole

Figure 1. Curriculum option (Doughty & William, 1998)

Conclusion

This paper discusses the definitions of focus on form, the difference between focus on form and focus on forms, and how focus on form helps enhance language acquisition together with some implications of grammar teaching under the notion of focus on form in EFL contexts.

Teachers have been well informed about the effectiveness of FonF instruction for the enhancement of language acquisition and learners' language accuracy. The challenge lying ahead is how language teachers can incorporate the knowledge from research studies and apply it to make language instruction most useful to students. We believe that learners' development of knowledge of grammar and grammar accuracy is not related to one particular teaching method, but teachers' engagement in making it happen.

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