

Learning Grammar through Task-Based Activities : A Case Study of First-Year English Majors at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the use of task-based activities helped students improve their learning achievement in learning English grammar on simple present tense. The samples were 40 first-year English majors who took English grammar 1 in the first semester of academic year 2014 at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University. They were selected by a simple random sampling. The research instruments included a pre-test and a post-test, lesson plans using task-based activities. The statistical procedures for data analysis were arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and t-test. The result of the study found that the students had average score of the post-test higher than the average score of the pre-test with statistical significance at the critical level of 0.01. This showed that learning English grammar on simple present tense through task-based activities highly helped the students to improve their learning achievement.

Keywords : Grammar activities, Tasks, Achievement test

การเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษด้วยกิจกรรมงานปฏิบัติ :
กรณีศึกษาของนักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่หนึ่ง
มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏอุบลราชธานี

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีจุดประสงค์ศึกษาว่ากิจกรรมงานปฏิบัติช่วยให้นักศึกษาเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษได้ดีขึ้นหรือไม่ กลุ่มตัวอย่างในงานวิจัยครั้งนี้คือนักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษชั้นปีที่หนึ่ง มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏอุบลราชธานี จำนวน 40 คน ที่เรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์ 1 ในภาคเรียนที่ 1 ปีการศึกษา 2557 ซึ่งได้มาโดยการสุ่มอย่างง่าย เครื่องมือวิจัยที่ใช้ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ประกอบด้วย แบบทดสอบก่อนเรียน แบบทดสอบหลังเรียน และแผนการสอนที่ใช้กระบวนการกิจกรรมงานปฏิบัติ (Task-Based Learning) ผลการวิจัยพบว่า นักศึกษามีคะแนนเฉลี่ยของแบบทดสอบหลังเรียนสูงกว่าคะแนนเฉลี่ยของแบบทดสอบก่อนเรียน อย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับ 0.01 แสดงว่าการสอนไวยากรณ์เรื่องปัจจุบันกาลโดยใช้กิจกรรมงานปฏิบัติ ช่วยให้นักศึกษาเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษได้ดีขึ้น

คำสำคัญ : กิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์; งานปฏิบัติ; ผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการเรียน

INTRODUCTION

English is widely accepted as an international language because it is used worldwide as a mean of communication. As we can see, many printed materials such as advertisements, signs, directions, and information on the Internet are in the English language. In Thailand, students are required to learn English as a foreign language (EFL) at all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. At the university or tertiary level, every student is required to take English as a foundation subject under the framework of general education, as stated in the Curriculum of Bachelor of Arts in English Programs (2011). However, despite the fact that Thai students have studied English for many years before entering university, they are still not good at English, especially in English grammar which is basic background for the macro skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Thus, teaching grammar successfully has always been a hot issue among English teachers at all levels. Thai students cannot use grammar effectively.

Teaching grammar to young learners requires an extensive knowledge of a great number of issues. In order to develop the students' ability in using English, teachers need to create an interesting method to teach target language lessons.

One particular aspect of knowledge about language is knowledge about grammar of sentence construction. Grammar is the study of how words fit together to form meaningful sentences. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English grammar (2003: 705), grammar is defined as the rules by which words change their form and are combined into sentences, or the study or use of these rules. Grammar is a particular description of grammar or book that describes grammar rules. Thornbury (2007) has divided grammar into 2 types: perspective grammar and descriptive grammar. Perspective grammar refers to the structure of a language as certain people think it should be used. Descriptive grammar refers to systematic study and description of a language which describe the grammatical constructions that are used in a language, without making any evaluation judgment about their standing in society. Both kinds of grammar are concerned with rules but in different ways. In conclusion, grammar can be defined as a description of the rule for forming sentences, including an account of meaning that these forms convey.

By teaching grammar, we do not only give students the means to express themselves, but we also fulfill their expectations of what learning language involves. With the emphasis on a communicative approach, teaching grammar focuses on grammatical forms during communicative interactions rather than forms in isolation. In addition, teaching grammar means enabling language students to use linguistic form accurately meaningfully and appropriately. There are various teaching strategies that can be used to meet goal. Over the centuries, there have been two main approaches to teach grammar. These are deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach is starting with the presentation of the rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is implied. The inductive approach is an approach which starts with some examples from the rule is inferred. The teacher gives the students a way to discover the rule themselves. In other words, the former is more teachers centered and the latter is more students centered.

Grammar can be taught in many different ways. One of the teaching methods which teachers normally use is PPP which stands for presentation, practice, production respectively. This method is popular because the teacher can simply give grammar rules to students before letting them practice by doing exercises (Freeman, 2000). Although this method is easy to manipulate, it may be boring to both teachers and students. As a result, the students may not be motivated to produce language communicatively, leading to the failure in learning as well as the negative attitudes towards learning grammar. Teachers can use a different method in teaching grammar when facing difficulties in presenting grammar to students. Using Task-based activities to teach grammar is an alternative teaching method technique to motivate the students to learn grammar accurately and use it communicatively.

Lindsay (2004 : unpagged cited in Nantipa Santadkarn, 20062) claims that task-based activities are another type of language learning which provided in task-based learning approach. The students do the task as a central to learning process. In task-based learning, the focus of classmate activities is on the task, and ultimately on meaning. Adam Simpson (2012: online) has referred to Jane Willis's flexible for task-based learning (TBL) is typically based on three stages: Pre-task activity, Task cycle, and Language focus and feedback.

Moreover, he has reported some advantages of using task-based activities that learners have an opportunity to use language they need for genuine purposes meaning that real communication should take place and during the time they are preparing their report for the whole class, they are forced to consider language form in general rather than concentrating on form in particular.

The core parts of task-based learning are tasks. (Brown : unpagged cited in Pimonpan Rojanacheewinsupond, 2009) The students' learning abilities are more effective when they are emphasized on the task than on the language they are using. The role of learners using task-based learning is increased while the role of teachers is decreased. The students work by themselves while the teacher acts as the facilitator whose duty is involved in setting up task, explaining how to do the tasks and creating activities to stimulate the students to real communication.

Willis (1996) has designed six task types of task-based learning activities and their outcome as follows:

1. Listing

These tasks involve brainstorming and fact-finding in which the students share their own knowledge and experiences in pairs or groups and find things out by asking each other. The outcome of this type will be the list or mind mapping.

2. Ordering and sorting

These tasks involve four main processes which are sequencing items, categorizing items and classifying items.

3. Comparing

The processes involve matching, comparing information, finding similarities and differences.

4. Problem Solving

The processes will vary depending on the task and complexity of the problem.

5. Sharing Personal Experiences

These tasks emphasized on learners' communication by talking more freely about themselves and sharing their experiences.

6. Creative Task

These tasks involve combination of task types. These tasks are sometimes called projects doing in pairs or groups.

The Difference between PPP and TBL

Willis (1998 cited in Chinnapen Rattanawong, 2004) has compared the differences between PPP and TBL approaches as follow:

In PPP approach:

1. The significant of language of language content in PPP approach focuses on content which the students must learn about the rules and forms then practice again and again until they can use language accurately.
2. The role of teacher is as a controller who controls the learning process.
3. The role of students is controlled by the structure that the teacher has constructed. It is unnatural.

In TBL approach:

1. The significant of language content in TBL approach focuses on meaning and how the students use the language then check grammatical accuracy.
2. The role of teacher is as a facilitator who gives some advice and facilitates the students while get stuck in learning process.
3. The role of students is more freely than PPP. Students are offered chances to practice and produce language without concerning about forms or rules. It is more natural.

From the information above, the researcher is inspired to study whether using task-based activities in teaching grammar proposed by Willis (1996) helps the students to improve learning English grammar on simple present tense as the selected topic.

Purposes of the Study

1. To investigate whether the use of task-based activities help students in learning English grammar.
2. To develop the teaching packages in learning grammar.

Research Question

Do task-based activities help first-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani

Rajabhat University to improve their English grammar knowledge on simple present tense?

Scope of the Study

This study aimed to investigate whether the use of task-based activities helps first year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University in learning grammar limited to simple present tense. All tasks used in this study were designed according to six types of tasks proposed by Jane Willis (1996).

Significance of the Study

This study is expected to provide a guideline in teaching to those who teach English as a foreign language with an interesting method of teaching English. It is expected that teaching grammar through task-based activities which focus on communication would work for Thai students limited to simple present tense.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Grammar activities refer to a teaching package processes tasks which students are required to experiment.

2. Tasks refer to pieces of worksheets or classroom activities which follow the tasks structure proposed by Jane Willis (1996) in which students are required to do together.

3. Achievement test refers to the students' knowledge achievement of grammar after learning grammar through task-based activities.

Data Collection

The data collection procedures are as follows:

1. A pre-test and a post-test were tried out with another section of English Grammar 1 class before they were used with the sampled class.

2. The pre-test was given to the students to evaluate the students' background of English grammar.

3. The students were required to study grammar by using the task-based learning activities.

4. The post-test was given to the students to compare the achievement of their grammar skill after learning through task-based activities.

5. The data were collected for comparison and analysis.

Data Analysis

The scores of the pre-test and the post-test were compared and analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test through the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) computer program.

Results of the Study

Table 2 The average scores of the first year English majors on Pre-test and Post-test.

| Test | N | \bar{X} | S.D. | t-value | Sig |
|-----------|----|-----------|-------|---------|---------|
| Pre-test | 40 | 14.78 | 5.480 | -8.201 | ** .000 |
| Post-test | 40 | 19.48 | 5.099 | | |

****P<0.01**

The mean score of the post-test is significantly higher than that of the pre-test. The average score of the pre-test is 14.78 (out of the total 30) while that of the post-test is 19.48. The standard deviation on the pre-test is 5.480. After learning simple present tense through task-based activities, the standard deviation on the post-test is 5.099. The difference is statistically significant at a level of 0.01 ($t=-8.201$, $p=.000$). In other words, the results of the study indicate that after the treatment, the students' ability in learning grammar through task-based activities has been increased significantly.

According to the results, it is found that the students can remember and understand the form and usage of the simple present tense structure. So, it can be concluded that the task-based activities help the students improve their English grammar ability. That is task-based activities help the students keep particular grammar points in their memory and use them when needed.

Discussion

The overall data revealed that after the students have been taught the simple present tense through task-based activities, the mean score of the post-test was higher than that of the pretest. This indicated that learning the simple present tense through task-based activities is effective. The students

who had been taught with task-based activities gain significantly higher scores after the teaching. Therefore, the result of the study agrees with Prabhu (1987 cited in Freeman 2000) who had adapted the TBL approach to teach his 40-ten-years old children. He found that while doing tasks, the students could use all four skills of language in a natural manner. In addition, the students are encouraged to use language in order to complete the tasks. This is one way to move them out of the classroom into the world and these tasks help to bridge the gap between language study and language use.

The result also agrees with the finding of Sukhonthip Vadhanamra (1996) who studied the effects of using task-based activities on English language communicative ability of second-year students at Thai Royal Air Force Academy. The result of this study showed that English language communicative ability of students who were taught by using task-based activities was higher than those who were taught by using the activities in the textbook.

Additionally, the result also agrees with Nantipa Santadkarn (2006) who studied the use of task-based activities in learning grammar in the past simple tense. She found that the students' ability in learning grammar through task-based activities had been increased significantly. It can be concluded that the ability of the students in this study increased through the use of task-based activities Therefore, this teaching method is of value in teaching grammar.

However, if we look at the raw scores of the students in this study, we see that some students still failed. It is probably because they were used to a more traditional grammatical syllabus and found this teaching method difficult which comes to term with Frost (2004) who says that learning grammar is a skill which takes times to master. This study was done within only 6 times or 18 periods, which was not sufficient to help low proficiency students gain sufficient improvement. Moreover, the students may have a poor ability in learning grammar using a unfamiliar teaching method which might not motivated them to learn English grammar.

Recommendations

1. Teachers should use task-based activities in other grammar points or

other skills of teaching English, such as speaking and writing.

2. The further study should be conducted with a large number of students in order to make the results more generalized.

3. It should be conducted with students of a particular proficiency level such as low proficient students in order to find out whether this teaching method works effectively.

4. The time duration for teaching by using task-based activities should be extended.

5. Teachers may try to use these activities with non-English majors in order to find out whether this teaching method helps those students in their English learning proficiency.

6. Teachers should create new strategies or methodologies in teaching grammar. As we can see from the result of the study, some students still failed in this study. It can be assumed that TBL can only be effective with some students who are in upper or in a higher level compared to other students.

7. Teachers may try to use another method in teaching grammar such as teaching grammar in context.

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