



Achieving Grammar Competence Using Transformative Approach with the Inclusion of Co-Curricular Activities

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Abstract

Over the past few years, the annexation of co-curricular activities (CCAs) in experiencing learning and assessing grammar competence has increasingly been filtered into educational discourse in the EFL context. The empirical evidence based on questionnaires shows that traditional methods in grammar learning do not foster learners' potential development and confidence in assessment tests. Learners are taught and assessed in different grammar components following only academic resources via close tests. This paper proposes to include co-curricular activities with academic content in a weekly lesson plan for experiencing grammar learning and assessment tests to 25 cohorts of the 1st semester of the Department of English at a private university in Bangladesh. This paper collected data through triangulation methods through observation, interviews, and focus group discussion using sociocultural theory (SCT). In this study, CCAs comprised drama, song, and debate to reinforce their ways of learning grammar, foster critical thinking, and assess grammar competence while writing scripts, lyrics, and speeches. It intended to launch a transformative approach with the inclusion of CCAs to remove inhibition and fear of the learners in grammar learning and assessment tests by creating a collaborative intervention with peers, teachers and learning contents. This paper investigated how CCAs facilitated academic grammar learning and worked as an effective means to engage learners comprehensively, reduce their affective filters implicitly, and thus, significantly impact the achievement of continuous classroom assessment. This paper may give learners and teachers a new vision of learning and assessing grammar in the EFL context.

Keywords: Experiencing Grammar learning, Co-curricular Activities, Transformative Approach, Assessing Grammar Competence, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Context

Introduction

The benefits and significance of co-curricular activities (CCAs) gain importance to be provided as an alternative means of experiencing grammar learning and assessment processes in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. CCAs provide a stress-free social environment, and offering these activities to teach grammar and academic content can be considered a valuable learning tool (Storey, 2010). According to Xiao and Luo (2009), the conferring period for these activities facilitates learners to comprehend the subject matter. It is important to emphasize that learning content, grammar learning, and the assessment process engage learners comprehensively, reduce their affective filters implicitly, and extend the assessment areas to attain inclusive competence. Grammar competence does not mean only achieving mere linguistic knowledge but also applying the notion of tense and aspect to accommodate learners' communicative choices. Unlike objectivist or interactionist, transformative teaching, inspired by SCT (sociocultural theory), is the internalization and transformation of new ideas through thinking on and about these new ideas (Nehuruela-Azarola, 2003). It facilitates learners to reach potential areas through communicative activities to be able to consciously apply grammatical knowledge rather than just knowing the forms or having the skill to deploy endings in second language development. Therefore, the study included co-curricular activities following a transformative approach to create a stress-free environment for learning and assessing grammar competence and let the student understand the significance of attaining grammar competence.

From the grammar-translation method (GTM) to communicative language teaching (CLT), the perennial debate on the role of grammar, its instruction and the way of assessment leads practitioners and researchers to go for new methods, replacing grammar exercises with meaningful contexts (Brouke, 2008). A good amount of research has been done on grammar learning with the inclusion of CCAs, and a relationship was found in measuring the grade point average (Richie, 2018). Various authors have investigated the association between co-curricular activities and ESL (English as a Second Language) students' success (Mitchell, 2015). Some explored the links between co-curricular activities, academic engagement, and self-efficacy (Wilson et al. (2014). However, the use of grammar learning and assessment methods is still a burning issue, especially in the context of EFL. The study draws researchers' experience applying a transformative approach to annexing co-curricular activities in grammar learning and assessment processes to attain comprehensive competence. The following study will show how CCAs following a transformative approach can effectively reduce inhibition and anxiety, reach potential areas, and promote conceptual development by applying pragmatic, textual, and grammatical concepts in second language development.

Background of the Study

Southeast University is a leading private university in Bangladesh where English is a foreign language. The Department of English offers a Basic English Skills course where different grammar components are taught, e.g. Tense, modals, articles, verb pattern, prepositions and so on, by the first semester students, following different strategies. Although numerous research works have been done against direct instruction, many practitioners continue their grammar teaching and assessment by focusing on 'form.'

or structure in the EFL context (Brouke, 2008)). A good number of studies show that extensive drilling and memorization are still the main ways of teaching grammar at school, college and university levels in Bangladesh, where learning English is mandatory (Shrestha, 2013). The way students learn grammar has an empty structure, morphology, and lexicon, which must be presented, described, and explained through extensive drilling and memorization. The way of learning considers learners' minds as 'containers' where information will be put in, and they will evoke that information while doing exercises and attending assessment tests. The assessment tests are held with discrete sentences or a passage focusing on 'form' to show their mastery in linguistic ability via cloze tests. The assessment method is not process-oriented but product-oriented, and it never explores their ability to use pragmatic, textual, or grammatical concepts in second language development. It addresses only their understanding or comprehension. The way of grammar learning and assessment leads them to think of language as an object or a system. In 1997, CLT was introduced to language teaching and grammar learning in Bangladesh, following an inductive approach. The empirical study shows that language teaching highlights meaning in conventional communicative classrooms where grammar is taught and assessed in focusing form and structure. In the objectivist or interactionist approach, students do not get any further means to experience their grammar learning nor to gain confidence in the assessment process through social and interpersonal activities.

Problem

These processes create challenges of "promoting conceptual reflection (i.e. the internalization and thus, the transformation of new ideas through thinking on and about these new ideas" (Neguerela-Azarola, 2013b). This inability to think critically raises affective filters in the learners. At the tertiary level, when students are asked to develop any concept using the language, the main problem they face is associating ideas with linguistic knowledge. The mere mastery of the form hinders them from thinking about or generating new ideas in the language. They become puzzled and anxious in writing correct sentences, which lowers their ability to learn and leads to inhibition and fright in grammar learning and assessment. They never become conscious learner to orient their communicative choices.

Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to shift from form-focused grammar learning and assessment areas to reflection-based conceptual development. So, it tailored co-curricular activities with academic content following a transformative approach to transforming learners at their thinking, learning, and assessment levels regarding experiencing and assessing grammar competence. The researcher had established two main goals:

1. To reach potential areas through communicative activities in second language development rather than attaining mere comprehension in linguistic knowledge

2. To develop confidence by reducing fear and inhibition and increasing involvement and engagement in the grammar learning process

Research Question

The identified problems stimulate the researcher to find out the right way in grammar instruction and assessment process and inspire him to explore the answers through the following questions:

1. How do CCAs facilitate learners to achieve grammar competence?
2. How well can the transformative approach be effective in teaching grammar?

Significance

The significant results of CCAs and transformative approach (TA) increased their usage in grammar learning and assessment. This research is unique as it promotes strategic social interaction (Dipietro, 1987) and meaningful significant intra-action while learning different components of grammar, more specifically, different sections of Tense. This uniqueness nurtures learners' potential to meet learning challenges, reduce inhibition and anxiety, create belongingness to the learning community, craft collaboration among peers-teachers-learning content and achieve the ability to consciously apply pragmatic, textual and grammatical concepts in foreign or second language development.

Data

The data was collected from 25 cohorts of the first semester from January 19, 2019, to April 29, 2019, regarding teaching different components of grammar, especially 'tense'.

Data Analysis

As the main goals of the study are to achieve the ability to apply pragmatic, textual, and grammatical concepts consciously to reduce anxiety and inhibition and increase confidence in the assessment process by ensuring their engagement and involvement in second language development, the analysis is to observe the trends over the period while CCAs are introduced following transformative approach in experiencing learning and assessing grammar competence.

The following topics are analyzed in more detail (from simple to complex sentences using different tenses): engagement level in experiencing grammar learning; scripts, lyrics and speech writings; and oral performance in using these speeches to accommodate their communicative choices. These areas gave insightful merits to the researcher in finding out the justification of applying a transformative approach with the annexation of CCAs to achieve these goals in experiencing and assessing grammar competence.

These insightful merits were analyzed qualitatively using the sociocultural theory lens through triangulation methods, observation, interviews, and focus group discussion (Vygotsky, 1978).

Goals

The goal of this research is to achieve the ability to consciously apply grammatical concepts in pragmatic and textual concepts through experiencing social and Interpersonal activities, with the collaboration of peers and teachers, are used to learn content while learning different grammar components, such as 'tense'. The goal is also to reduce anxiety and inhibition and increase confidence in the assessment process, ensuring learners' engagement and involvement.

Frameworks for Actions

The Basic English Skills course is offered to the students of 1st semester to improve grammatical knowledge to develop language proficiency in four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The classes are held twice a week. Classroom assessment and midterm and final examinations are crucial to learning and achieving grammar competence. Students are assessed in the four skills throughout the semester in every class, which gives them the opportunity and sufficient time to experience their learning through more

practices with the inclusion of co-curricular activities following a transformative approach.

According to the Ministry of Education, Singapore (2018), co-curricular activities (CCAs) are an integral part of holistic education that fosters learners' critical thinking to meet their learning challenges, nurture their learning abilities to work within a given structure and construct creative outlook to their education and academics. These activities create their belongingness and community feeling to learning content. A stress-free environment is the primary condition for successful L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1981). As the CCAs create an accessible environment, provide clarity and improve organizational skills and time management (Greg & Narelle, 2017), the researcher transformed their experience learning and assessment content into scripts, lyrics, speeches, writings and oral performances playing drama, songs and debates, respectively.

Whereas SCT or sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) views learning as inherently a social process activated through the 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)' (Dillenbourg, 1999), a transformative approach inspired by SCT focuses on the 'zone of potential development (ZPOD)' (Negureula-Azarola, 2013b). The ZPOD concept leads to thinking language development, which results from the appropriation and internalization of concepts mediated by social and interpersonal activities (Gracia, 2012). According to Negureula-Azarola (2015), Transformative pedagogies for the ELT classroom are about engaging and contributing with others in social interaction, and this is the origin of conceptual intra-action in L2 learning and development. The development implies that a learner is grammatically correct when speaking or writing not because of knowing the forms or skill to adopt endings but because they understand and can apply the notion of tense and aspect to orient their communicative choices (Gracia, 2012).

The worthy themes of co-curricular activities following the transformative approach, the possibility of its usages to grammar learning and success in second language development stimulate the researcher to cultivate the following issues to achieve competence:

1. To change the pre-occupied mindset of the previous grammar learning and assessment method.
2. To learn in collaboration with peers, teachers and learning content
3. To remove fear and inhibition
4. To foster critical thinking and to generate new ideas.
5. To create space to experience the learning between learning and assessment.
6. To extend the areas of the assessment process
7. To shift from ZPD to ZPOD in the learning process
8. Performance is an integral part of achieving competence.
9. Drama, song and debate are exciting and relaxing activities.

Actions

Learning takes place in two steps: learning and experiencing learning. The assessment also extended its areas to engagement and confidence in applying the knowledge of Tense. As students were already aware of the rules or form because of their school and college levels of grammar learning, ample examples have been taken from different sources to allow them to review their knowledge of 'Tense'. They were also asked to relate that information to their own lives, which led them to think and helped them create new knowledge through writing and speaking. The errors and mistakes were corrected in collaboration with peers and teachers, and learning content was learned through participation and discussion. The pre-occupied mindset of the way of form-focus grammar learning had been removed, showing the importance of creativity in developing a second language.

The uniqueness of this study is that the learners experienced learning 'Tense' amidst writing scripts, lyrics and speeches in a group in and out of the classroom. Five students were in each group where strategic social interaction (Dipietro, 1987) and meaningful significant intra-action (Garcia, 2012) ensured everyone's almost equal participation in writing. Students were guided to write and practice verbally and present their assignment in the form of drama, song or debate in the classroom through performing these activities. The assessment process observed accuracy and their ability to orient their communicative choices in generating new knowledge and developing the language in writing. The assessment also observed their confidence level while performing their assigned topic to ensure their engagement and involvement and reduce anxiety and inhibition. The researcher kept a record of observation by taking notes in the prescribed form. As these activities and assignments were included in the weekly lesson plan, they could experience this practice

throughout the semester to strengthen their ability to apply grammatical knowledge to develop pragmatic, textual concepts. The interviews and focus-group discussion gave learners a positive perception and interest in learning and assessing grammar competence.

Results and Discussions

The above actions and steps combined showed positive trends in facilitating grammar learning and assessment. The assessments focused on accuracy, orienting communicative choices, and developing concepts to generate new language knowledge. Each group got the opportunity to experience their learning five times. Every time, the trends in these areas went up. In general, the accuracy level increased from 50% to 80%; the ability to orient communicative choices was boosted from 40% to 70%, and conceptual development was enhanced from 60% to 80%.

The actions and steps of learning and assessment also increased learners' engagement levels. Engagement has been ensured by observing their participation and interest. The stress-free and relaxed values of CCAs increased their belongingness and interest. The level of inhibition and anxiety was also reduced.

Through their interviews and focus group discussions, the participants experiencing grammar learning comprehended and acknowledged that they should not only have grammar knowledge to achieve accuracy but also need to achieve the ability to apply grammatical knowledge in developing concepts consciously. They believed a stress-free environment was essential to nurture their learning abilities. They thought classroom learning should promote group work outside the classroom to facilitate and accelerate social and interpersonal activities under the umbrella of CCAs following a transformative approach.

The annexation of co-curricular activities following the transformative approach lets the students learn grammar beyond academic learning content in and out of the classroom. Their writing topic required logical, emotional and communicative expression and accuracy amidst writing scripts, lyrics and speeches. They rehearsed several times about what to say and write for performing drama, song and debate. In writing, they got feedback from each other in correcting form or structure, choosing lexical items, and developing concepts. These steps reinforced their grammar learning and promoted them to reach potential areas through these communicative activities. These learning processes and activities created their community feeling and belongingness to the learning topic and helped them remove inhibition and reduce anxiety about grammar learning. As every group performed in the classroom, they put more effort into the classroom for better performance. This environment created the space for autonomous learning and increased their self-esteem and confidence. This way of learning and learning activities facilitated the teacher to consider their writing and oral performance as part of their continuous classroom assessment.

The researcher collected data from the beginning of the semester and analyzed these trends until the end. The researcher found positive trends in one group and the rest of the four groups. The performance varied from group to group in writing and speaking, but all groups showed upward trends in their abilities.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study revealed some significant results regarding grammar learning, the importance of including CCAs in experiencing grammar learning, and the extension of the areas in assessing grammar competence. The learning steps and assessment process allowed the learners to experience their grammar learning, changed their traditional way of grammar learning, and helped them to know how to achieve inclusive grammar competence. The study showed that co-curricular activities following a transformative approach reduced learners' inhibition and fright, increased engagement and confidence level, promoted communicative activities to reach potential areas through internalization and transformation of new ideas, and helped them to attain the ability to orient their communicative choices and consciously apply grammatical concepts to attain.

inclusive competence in second language development. The study requires further research involving more students focusing on other grammatical components. These achievements require more effort from the students and teachers. The importance and significance of annexation of co-curricular activities following a transformative approach in experiencing and assessing grammar competence give a new vision to learners and teachers in the EFL context.

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