Teaching micro skills Through Communicative Activities in EFL Classes in Albania

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Abstract

In English language teaching and learning, an essential role is played by grammar and vocabulary. The main question stated in the study lays on how grammar is taught in our English classes, inductively or deductively? In EFL classes, it is thought that grammar is not particularly special, but studies show that teaching it communicatively enables student to improve communicative ability in foreign language.

This paper focuses on: How grammar and vocabulary are taught? What is their importance in language learning? What kind of strategies and activities may be used to facilitate teaching in English classes? What is the perception of students about communicative activities used in class? This paper is based on theoretical analysis and practical analyses. When the purpose of learning is to achieve communication, skills and microskills are learned in meaningful contexts.

Keywords: *communicative competence, vocabulary activities, communicative grammar activities.*

New approaches of teaching in EFL classes in Albania

As English has become a global language and one of the most important ones, even in Albania it is part of the school curriculum. Students begin to study foreign languages at an early age. In public schools children begin to study at the 3rd grade, while in non- public schools it may begin since the 1st grade (age 6-7). But what is the most important thing is the changing view of perception *"Why people study a foreign language?"* During communism period foreign language was studied mainly for cultural background. Nowadays we find a shift from *"cultural knowledge"* to the perception of "*learning to use the language for communication and for different purposes.*" The same happened even with the methods and the textbooks used to learn foreign languages. They changed rapidly.

The method used was Grammar Translation Method while the foreign language curricula today focus in Communicative Language Teaching. Through this method learners learn the language in meaningful context, in a communicative way through interaction. Students should be able to speak fluently and to use English outside the classroom. Learning grammar it's not the primarily focus as it is speaking, but it is not said that it should be neglected as it is the core of each language. It's also important to practice and to distinguish linguistic skills, their role in language acquisition and reinforcement of communicative ability.

According to the *Curriculum of Foreign Languages*[1] used in Albania a special importance in foreign language acquisition is played by language skills. Communicative ability is increased through teaching and learning the four language skills which must be integrated in their use. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*[2] describes each level of language skills according to the type and level. Students must practice different communicative and functional examples of language.

To enhance students' communicative abilities, skills play a key role, so teaching language skills in a practical way is of a great importance. It is noted that to achieve communicative ability, users must participate in communicative language activities and in this case the four skills are practiced. Successful acquisition and learning depends on the teacher and student at the same time, environment, and motivation, learning styles, teacher's strategies and goals.

About the importance of integration of language skills we can mention a statement of Mohan, according to whom acquisition of language skills such as reading and speaking are a key to a successful learning.[3] Teaching and learning require that listening, speaking, reading and writing should be respected used and placed on the balance between them to help students use all skills and communicative expressions.[4] Students are taught how to listen effectively, how to read quickly and efficiently, how to speak and write fluently specific types of texts.[5] So the role that these skills play in acquisition of communicative ability is great.

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[1] *Kurrikula Kombëtare e Gjuhëve moderne për Arsimin Parauniversitar*, Ministria e Arsimit dhe Shkencës, Grup Autorësh (Tirane, 2000), 11-15.

[2] *Kuadri i Përbashkët Evropian i Referencave për Gjuhët*, Ministria e Arsimit dhe Shkencës, Grup Autorësh (Tirane, 2001).

[3] Bernard Mohan, *Language and content* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1986).

[4] Bardhyl Musai, *Koncepti për mësimdhënien me në qendër nxënësin* (Tirane, 2003), 15.

[5] Jill Hadfield and Charles Hadfield, *Introduction to Teaching English* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 72.

Grammar and teaching activities

When studying a language, teachers focus on structural part of it. Harmer states that the purpose of studying a language is to increase the learner's knowledge about acquisition of language skills.[6] In today's teaching, grammar and vocabulary are as important as the other skills, that is why they should be explained and checked through communicative or task based activities. Instructional materials intend to promote learning in communication, by establishing linguistic and interactive means.[7] Even lexicon and phonology should be integrated through communicative techniques of teaching.

By teaching grammar and vocabulary even the other skills are practiced as well. It is important to teach grammar inductively through different techniques such as language games. Interactive games help students practice grammar, vocabulary, spelling and help passive students being active ones. Wilkins, in his study on the CLT emphasizes that grammar plays an important role. He states that the notion that a person can develop the ability to communicate without extensive knowledge of grammar system is absurd.[8] In teaching English, teachers focus on teaching language skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary which are called micro- skills. In the *Framework* of *the Common European Reference for Languages* it is given this explanation about grammar skill: *"The grammatical skill is the ability to organize sentences to convey meaning, which is the core of communicative competence."*[9] So if grammatical competence is taught in a communicative way, it plays a major role in language acquisition. The main purpose of CLT is to enable students to learn the language structures without making mistakes. The study of language in this way, increases knowledge of the language system, in a broader sense, students are trained in both language skills, receptive and productive.[10]

Teaching grammar in CLT is done inductively and not deductively like GTM because grammar should be used as a tool to achieve communication. If students learn just the rules, they will not be able to communicate efficiently. If the

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[6] Jeremy Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2008), p. 271.

[7] *Kurrikula Kombëtare e Gjuhëve moderne për Arsimin Parauniversitar*, Ministria e Arsimit dhe Shkencës, Grup Autorësh (Tirane, 2000), 15.

[8] David Wilkins, "Notional Syllabuses Revisited," *Journal of Applied Linguistics* 2(1) (1981): 83-89.

[9] *Kuadri i Përbashkët Evropian i Referencave për Gjuhët*, Ministria e Arsimit dhe Shkencës, Grup Autorësh (Tirane, 2006), 112.

[10] Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, 200.

rules are understood through practical exercises they reinforce grammar through language uses and vice-versa. What is stressed nowadays a lot is the fact that every foreign language should be taught by implementing CLT, because language is for communication and students should make use of it in the real life.

When the purpose of education is to achieve communication, then grammar and vocabulary that students learn begin from the function, contextual situations and roles of interlocutors.[11] Learning grammar is done through speaking, reading, writing and listening exercises. Teachers and learners must have clear ideas of what is understood by grammatical competence and its role in communication. For this reason grammar should be taught inductively through a variety of communicative exercises. We can take in consideration and summarize some types of grammatical communicative exercises that Littlewoods proposes such as:

- *Practicing communicative language* through information gap exercise (talking about a picture) using pair or whole class-work.[12]

As we can see what Littlewood proposes it's not difficult for teachers. Teachers must be aware that by using communicative tasks will help students acquire language and be fluent. If we use authentic materials, the tasks would provide students with authentic language. By practicing they will activate what they know and also learn new things. Another effective way to practice language is to bring in English classes films, documentaries, songs. If they are adapted to student's language level and age they are a very good source of authentic language.

The importance of vocabulary

When we speak about learning a foreign language, vocabulary plays a major and important part. More words we learn more possibilities are given to use them in communication. With the development of different methods of teaching, vocabulary is taught in different ways. Techniques used by teachers vary according to age, language level, expectancies. Sometimes learning new words becomes a routine and for this reason may be neglected. *Then what to do with it?* Our students encounter many problems in relation to grammar and vocabulary. To overcome such problems teachers should teach it in a natural way. Teaching vocabulary aims to expose students to clarify meaning of the words or expressions,

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[11] Freeman D. Larsen, *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (OUP, 2008), 131-136.
[12] William Littlewood, *Grammar in a communicative approach* (English Centre, University of Hong Kong, 1992), 1-6.

so it is important for students to deal with listening and reading assignments to illustrate the meaning of new vocabulary in context.[13]

Richards[14] states that words are contained in a closed system so that they can not be taught in isolation without taking in consideration the meaning in the context in which they are used. Vocabulary can be learned best through reading assignments, or listening ones. When words or phrases are communicative in meaningful contexts, integration of skills through communicative activities and tasks increases students' ability to communicate. In a reading task students can practice listening, speaking, writing. In this way students can practice all language skills in a simple, practical and communicative way.

Teaching based on communicative tasks is appropriate for all language levels, but the nature of the tasks varies according to the language proficiency. Tasks should be presented from the simple to the more difficult, adapted to language level of learners. For example: Students work together to write and edit a newspaper, make an advertisement est. Elementary students may introduce themselves, may make questions and answers, interview other class-mates, while the advanced can do most difficult tasks such as preparing surveys on various issues at school.

Teaching language skills together exposes English language learners to authentic language and encourages them to interact in a natural way. Learners create clear ideas that language has its own difficulties when used for and in communication. Students learn that English is not simply the object of study, but a means to interact and communicate with others.

Methodology

The study is based on researches how CLT is implemented in English classes. Part of this study are questionnaires about how skills and micro skills are taught, what activities are used. There are stated some questions about this problem: *What problems do our students encounter? What about teachers? What strategies, techniques, communicative activities and tasks are used to teach skills and micro skills?* We will have a look at how students and teachers responded to such problems. Participants of this study are students and teachers of elementary and high school. The age varies from 10- 18, Grades from 5-12, about 250 students and 30 teachers in elementary and high schools.

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[13] Harmer, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, 229.

[14] Jack C. Richards, *The context of language teaching* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Uses of different techniques for important teaching and learning processes

There are stated some research questions to teachers and there are presented some techniques. Teachers should define which do they use. Teachers stated that they are limited in usage somehow because of large classes, limited time, structural texts which do not leave too much space to variety in teaching.

Teaching techniques used for these processes	
- Critical thinking	✓ Brainstorming Discussion
- Speaking	✓ Conversation practise Role-play discussion
- Reading	✓ Discussion Read and Look up
- Listening	✓ Information-gap
- Writting	✓ Information-gap
- Explaining	✓ Map drawing /Charts / Brainstorming
- Teaching vocabulary	✓ Perifrazing/ Charts
- Teaching grammar	
Deductive	60% 18 teachers
Inductive	40% 12 teachers

The second question concentrates on vocabulary teaching and how it is checked. 76 % of students admitt that vocabulary is explained in native language and written in the blackboard. In the third and second grade, especially in non-public schools teachers explained and checked vocabulary through games, while at other levels in schools teachers continue to check vocabulary through translation. As for the concept of using language games to teach skills and micro skills, still teachers limit their teaching.

Language games and role plays are limited to what the text offers. The tasks offered in texts are merely a mechanical repetition, which offers limited communication. If students are limited in such a way it does not help. If grammar is taught deductively students will not be able to speak and use English as in the real life. The same fact stands even for teaching and checking vocabulary. If language games and communicative tasks are used than students will be motivated and more involved in the learning process.

Conclusion

Traditional methods of teaching a foreign language do not help students acquire and use language. Grammar is as important as other skills. Teaching it inductively through and in a communicative way help students communicate in a conscious way, taking into account their real experiences.

If teachers make use of communicative activities for teaching and checking grammar and vocabulary will help students to understand the purpose of learning. If grammar is explained in an inductive way through language games, role plays, it will not be boring but funny and attractive. Through such tasks and activities students will interact and use the language as in the real life.

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