Review and Analysis of Theories Underlying Grammar Teaching Methodologies

Asma Alqahtani
English Language Institute
University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Email: Asma.aedh@gmail.com

Received: 05/28/2022  Accepted: 11/14/2022  Published: 12/15/2022

Abstract
Grammar is significant in learning other language skills, such as speaking and writing. Theories of teaching grammar in a foreign language are vital as they allow EFL teachers to build a frame for language learners. Grammar instruction is a bridge that links learners with other skills and if their grammar competence is vulnerable, the whole language production will be weak too. This study seeks to understand and review language theories that underlie daily grammar teaching. Many of EFL/ESL teachers teach grammar without a solid understanding of the language theories that inform their actual teaching practices and methodologies. This paper sheds light on the linguistics theories underlying grammar teaching methodologies in most English as foreign language classes and textbooks. It is significant for English teachers to have a basic knowledge of language acquisition theories as it directly influences their ability to provide appropriate content-area instructions.

Keywords: Behaviorism theory, Cognitivism theory, English teaching methods, grammar teaching

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no4.6
Introduction

Teaching grammar in a foreign language is significant as it enhances students’ performance, as well as enables teachers to construct an appropriate plan to frame students’ learning. Moreover, grammar is significant as it will enable EFL teachers to build a frame for language learners. Grammar is essential to master any language as it allows learners to produce well-structured written and spoken English. Grammar instruction is a bridge that links learners with other skills, and if their grammar competence is inefficient, the whole language production will be inadequate too. Understanding language theories that underlie daily grammar teaching is significant for English teachers to have a basic knowledge of language acquisition theories as it directly influences their ability to provide appropriate content-area instructions. There are no sufficient studies that have tackled the linguistics theories underlying grammar teaching methodologies in most English as foreign language classes and textbooks. This paper seeks to inform ESL/EFL educators with a basic knowledge of language acquisition theories as it directly influences their ability to provide appropriate content-area instructions.

Literature Review

Theories Underlying Grammar Teaching Methodologies

Richards and Rodgers (2014) indicate that one of the most popular and predominant methods of teaching grammar is using structure-based methods (such as the deductive method), which includes the grammar-translation method as well as the audiolingual method. Blyth (1996) illustrated, “largely unchanged for decades, the presentation of grammar in foreign language textbooks and classrooms continues to be based on an outdated combination of behaviorism, structuralist linguistics, and versions of audiolingual” (p.51). On the other hand, the inductive approach to teaching grammar helps learners discover the grammar rules themselves which is like the communicative, functional, and integrative approaches to teaching grammar.

Behaviorism Theory

Behaviorism theory is a psychology theory initiated by Watson as a reaction to traditional grammar. Many theorists who support this theory, such as, Leonard Bloomfield, Mowrer, Skinner, and Staats. Every behaviorist theorist holds a different view of this theory. There are only two behaviorists who explored this theory in depth: Pavlo and Watson and Skinner, as indicated by Wijayanti (2012). This theory is a systematic psychological approach to understanding human and animal behavior.

Human behavior is generally a result of stimulus-response actions, and states people acquire behaviors through interaction with the environments stated by Mcleod (2008). Behaviorism theory on educating human beings is based on the notion that behavior is controlled through positive and negative reinforcement. Practical examples of this theory are star charts or timeouts for elementary school-aged children. Rivers (1968) states, “The Behaviorism theory of stimulus-response learning, particularly as developed in the operant conditioning model of Skinner, considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward” (p.73). Behaviorism theory also “measures observable behavior that are produced by the learner to respond to the stimuli” (Wijayanti, 2012, p.56).
Grammar presentations in most EFL textbooks, syllabi, and classes are still based on the theory of Behaviorism. Behaviorism theory reflects the traditional approach or the explicit instruction of grammar. Traditional teaching approach, or the deductive approach, is based on ideas of learning such as Behaviorism and Cognitive Code theories as stated by Blyth (1997). Budiman (2017) says that there are different methods of teaching grammar that draw on the Behaviorism theory, such as the Grammar Translation method (GTM), Direct method (DM), Situational Language Teaching (SLT), and the Audio-Lingual method.

This theory of teaching focuses mainly on the production or the output of language and ignores the significance of input in the process of grammar acquisition. Patten (1996) emphasizes on the mismatch between theory and practice when teachers use traditional deductive teaching approaches "with its emphasis on output practice, a traditional approach to grammar instruction ignore the crucial rule of input in second language acquisition" (p. 6). Behaviorism views imitation and practice as primary processes in language development, it resembles children learning their first language, where they imitate, and practice others sounds and words in their attempts to start speaking. Thus, children receive positive reinforcements from adults to encourage them to communicate and learn the language. This theory—based on the habit formation of language teaching. It resembles the learning of traditional, or explicit, grammar language learning, as it ignores language learning and problem-solving instead of the information and performance of habits (cited in Demirezeen,1988). Alissa (2003) states that this theory, with it is heavy reliance on a stimulus-response model, places learners as individual and passive.

Two of the common characteristics of Behaviorism in teaching are the teacher-centered role, wherein students tend to be passive and standardized tests to measure students’ behavioral response. Demirezen (1988) illustrates that there are some postulates when integrating Behaviorism Theory in teaching a second language, where learning is based on the following: imitation, reinforcement, and rewards. In addition, he adds that imitation is help acquire basic vocabulary and sentences; however, different studies found that learning language through imitation resulted in no invitations. Imitation is significant in the initial stages of learning. Behaviorism is the process of learning a second language based on generalizations in language learning where learners imitate, or model teachers sentences through habit formation or drill exercises. It hinders students’ ability to innovate or produce instinctive language daily. Behaviorism theory would lead to delays in improving speech and hindering creative learning. However, some linguists believe that this theory is constructive in the early stages of language learning especially for young children.

Cognitivism Theory

With the dominance of Behaviorism in the second language acquisition field for a period, and with its shortcoming of exploring the complexity of language learning, cognitivist psychologists called for another approach to inform human learning. Cognitivism theory seeks to understand the process occurred in a learner’s mind. The focus of a cognitivist view is to provide the right environment for children to develop cognitively. Practical examples of this theory such as delivering materials and activities appropriate to a child’s developmental stage or dividing children into groups by developmental stage. Chomsky (1955) was a cognitivist who opposed the Behaviorism theory. He illustrated that humans are constantly produce and understand new
utterances, a process that cannot be explained by behavioristic theorists. This fact about learning influenced language teaching practices and teaching methods, such as Grammar-Translation and Audio-lingual, are based on Behaviorism theory, and structural linguistics that continue dominating language learning classrooms. Cognitivism theory became popular in language learning in 1970, as illustrated by Megrel (1998). In the language learning realm, Cognitivism theory manifested to compensate for Behaviorism which ignores the mental processes in learners’ minds when they compose an utterance.

In 1968, Chomsky indicated that children acquire language innately and naturally. Children have a universal grammar that enables them to internalize a complex system of rules to produce speech with meaningful sentences. The universal grammar theory analyzes how learners’ minds process information, while behaviorism considers the external conditioning agents instead of the mental process. Cognitivism considers all mental processes that occur in the learners’ mind such as, “sensation, perception, attention, encoding, and memory that behaviorists were reluctant to study because cognition occurs inside the black box of the brain” (Jordan, Carlite & Stack, 2008, p. 36). This theory interprets acquiring a second language as a conscious and reasoned thinking process. Sharma (2014) illustrated that a child’s knowledge defined by cognitivist conception as something to be investigated, discovered, and individually constructed. Many linguists who worked to develop the Cognitivism Theory, such as Charles Fillmore, George Lakoff, Ronald Longacker, and Leonard Tamly. In 1990, the work of the linguists mentioned above formed the leading strands of the theory, but connections with related theories, such as construction grammar were developed by other cognitive linguists. Lee (2011) indicates, “cognitivists argue that linguistic structure is a direct reflection of cognition in the sense that a particular linguistic expression is associated with a particular way of conceptualizing a given situation” (p. 1). Lee adds that Cognitivism has many implications for learning and teaching and that all knowledge must be meaningful to the learner. The best learning strategies are those built on promoting learners’ metacognitive strategies to enable language learners to plan, organize, and monitor their learning. Hadley (2001) indicates that although learning a language includes applying a complex system of rules, teachers must provide learners with means to improve their output in communication to apply the learned rules with constructive feedback from the teacher. Teachers should not ignore students’ previous knowledge, and they should build on it and integrate it with the new material.

Constructivism Theory

Blyth (1997) states that the Constructivism theory has been presented and developed by several psychologists, such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Kant, and Gardner. Constructivism posits that human knowledge, “does not and cannot have the purpose of producing a representation of an independent reality, but instead has an adaptive function” (Glaserfeld, 1992, p. 3). Constructivism theory rejects perceiving learners’ knowledge as a direct reflection of reality and that every individual can independently construct their validity. Learners acquire language through experience and practice related to the real world. Brooks & Brooks (1999) find that the classroom comprises a collaborative discussion between teachers and students where they can improve their critical thinking.
The constructivist standpoint states that human beings are all different, and those differences are opportunities for our collective growth as contributors to the totality of humanity’s knowledge. Rummel (2008) illustrates that Piaget and Vygotsky were two psychologists who developed the Constructivism theory. This theory indicates that children learn through interaction and participation with others. Piaget was one of the most influential linguists who forcefully presented this theory of understanding children’s mental learning. Piaget’s perspective of active learning perspective occurs if teachers promote learners’ assimilation and accommodation. He posits that children, when thinking, use various cognitive structures to make a logical interpretation of the world. Driscoll (1994) indicated, “The structures available to children are determined by their biological readiness and their life experiences and, he believed, in genetic epistemology” (p. 59).

Constructivism has very significant implications to the field of language teaching. John (1990) indicates that language learning can occur in an environment where language is used to socially communicate. Learners’ roles shift from passive to active as they individually interact and construct their meaning and learning. Marlowe and Page (2005) illustrate that this theory, concerning language acquisition, is built upon creating knowledge, not receiving it. In addition, constructivism in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) is about thinking and analyzing, not accumulating, and memorizing the language.

**Sociocultural Theory**

In the second language learning field, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in teaching a language, views learning as a social act better achieved through collaboration with peers. Richards & Rodgers (2001) posit that sociocultural theory is an umbrella term that covers several language teaching techniques implemented in second language learning and teaching classrooms. In teaching, Integrative grammar advocate students’ interaction while learning, which perceived as a cognitive process of learning a Second Language (L2). This theory views learning “embedded within social events and occurring as a child interacts with people, objects and events in the environment” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.287). All students’ mental functions such processing and using grammar in sentences can occur individually as well as in collaboration with peers Wertsch & Rogoff (1984).

When integrating form and meaning in teaching grammar, Spada and Lightbown (1993) argue, “that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both the short and long term” (p. 205). According to Sysoyev (1999), integrative grammar covers three stages: language exploration, explanation, and expression. The first stage is where students given different sentences to explain a specific grammar rule. Then, students were required to work in groups with the teacher’s assistance to find the grammar pattern and explore the new grammar rule. In the second stage, students needed to summarize what was previously discovered, but now focusing on the form. In the last step, students were asked to practice and use the explored rules communicatively by interacting with other peers.

Interaction and dialogue with peers or others will develop learners’ cognitive abilities. Through social interaction with others, learners utilize language as a tool to construct meaning Vygotsky (1978). Scaffolding is a term used by Vygotsky to indicate the amount of learning that
learners can acquire with the assistance of an adult or a more competent peer to solve tasks beyond their current levels.

Another concept of Vygotsky’s ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) refers to the cognitive development that occurs through the interaction between a learner and other knowledgeable peer or teacher. He posits that learners can extend their knowledge if provided with a space for social interaction in which they improve from those interactions, which means that knowledge is different from learning. In addition, engaging learners in authentic, goal-oriented activities to help them internalize academic concepts and creating “structured mediational spaces where they can develop their teaching skills are thus among the main premises on which sociocultural teacher education is based” Johnson & Golombek(2020).

Churcher, Downs, and Tewksbury (2014) illustrated, “While knowledge is co-constructed in the environment (inter-psychologically) with others learning occurs within the individual (intra-psychologically) with some internal mechanisms through collaboration” (p.35). Moreover, Jones (2000) indicated, “the human mind is an originator of experience rather than a passive recipient of perception and that the external physical world is known only through individual sensations” (p.3). Humans construct their knowledge by participating in everyday mental activities. In addition, through internalization, humans can improve their learning experiences.

**The Place of Grammar in Different English Teaching Methods**

The most appropriate method to ensure the success of teaching foreign languages is to adopt a good teaching method. Demirel in Öztürk (2018) purports that the problem of teaching a foreign language is essentially a methodological problem, and the only way to achieve the highest level of success in teaching grammar based on the methods adopted in teaching. Grammar teaching methods include different applications teachers use to achieve the preferred learning and teaching objectives. Grammar constituted a critical element in foreign language teaching until the onset of the 20th century. However, while the significance of grammar in teaching foreign languages continues to exist, Öztürk asserts that different stakeholders, including teachers, learners, parents, and some academicians, are divergent about how grammar should deliver in a foreign language classroom. In the teaching methods and classroom practices, an overwhelming majority preferred an inductive and explicit approach to grammar teaching Al-khresheh, and Orak(2021).

There are different methods have been adopted in teaching grammar. Oztürk asserts that the commonly adopted methods of teaching language that has adopted by the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages Department include the Grammar-Translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, and total physical response.

**Grammar-Translation Method**

As stated in Öztürk (2018), the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) is regarded as one of the oldest approaches to teaching grammar which was popular in the nineteenth century. This method focuses on the goal of achieving grammatical competence. This method has several characteristics and techniques that will be used in its implementation to help to achieve high level of grammatical competence (Al-maamari, 2021). In this method, grammar depicts as a collection of numerous rules needed for linguistic production. Grammar has been presented in a deductive,
and explicit manner and therefore, teaching focuses on fortification via reading and rendition tasks after learning the grammar was espoused. Grammar-translation method found on the philosophy of teaching language rules, principles, and structure intensively, forcing learners to remember language vocabulary with the assistance of a list of vocabulary terms, as indicated by Öztürk (2018). It requires learners to translation studies from a language of interest into their native language and from their native language to the language of interest. Despite the emergence of many other methods of teaching grammar, this method applies in the teaching process without losing its value. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) purport that, students who learn a foreign language using the grammar-translation method cannot use it as a means of communication. Educators often prefer the GTM because they can simply teach students a rule, give them some practice, and help students learn how to use the learned grammar rule in their communication.

**Direct Method**

The direct method is the direct opposite of the grammar-translation method. Batool, Anosh and Iqbal (2015) insist that the direct method needs to be connected directly with the language of interest without translating it into the mother tongue. Accordingly, the direct method is prevalent and helps learners perform a particular exercise that provides learners with an opportunity to communicate effectively or share information in a foreign language. The underlying rationale of this method lies in the meaning of words, language acquisition, and expressive gestures, which are directly related to the picture of an object in learners’ mind and having a vivid memory of it as if they could see it. Rivers in Batool et al. (2015) demonstrates that students stand a better chance of understanding how to communicate in a language by not only listening but also via speaking.

**Audio-lingual Method**

Mukalel (2005) describes audio-lingual as the recommended term when referring to a method of teaching foreign language with the aim of instilling in learners’ oral abilities to communicate fluently. This method is based on Skinner’s behavioral theory, where students learn grammar through repetition, practice, and “memorization” (Spada, 2007, p. 273). Audio-lingual Method views teaching grammar in an inductive way where learners are required to induce grammatical rules after receiving new structures from the teachers. Compared to other methods such as direct translation, an audio-visual method provides great deal of motivational activities for learning a foreign language. Mukalel (2005) states that the audio-lingual method can provide an appropriate atmosphere for teaching a foreign language. However, Larsen-Freeman (2001) points out, “the important problem regarding Audio-Lingual Method was learners’ inability to transfer the habits they had mastered in the class to communicative use outside it” (p. 35). The audio-lingual method depends on dialogue and drills in learning which makes it redundant in attracting teachers and learners.

**Communicative Language Teaching Approach**

Brown (2007) indicated that the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach encompassed a broad theoretical position toward language teaching. This comprehensive theory prompted many questions regarding its suitability and usability in curricula with diverse students. CLT can be traced back to Hymes (1972), who proposes the idea that learning a language is more than competency in grammar or lexical items. Instead, language learners must develop communicative competence on a daily life basis. This notion was adopted by many language
educators. Hiep (2007) cites how Canale and Swain (1980) elaborate on CLT to encompass “communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence” (Hiep, 2007, p.193). It is recommended for instructors to encourage the notion that Halliday (1994, p. 54) the learning group ideal, where learners can improve their communication skills by communicating with their peers in the classroom and by embracing curricula that uses authentic language input materials.

The CLT approach balances theory and application because it teaches grammar inductively, in a practical way, which helps instructors to recognize and reveal the myriad benefits and positive effects of applying this approach to teaching the English language. As Hiep (2007) illustrates, “When CLT theory is put into action a particular context, a range of issues open up, but these issues do not necessarily negate the potential usefulness of CLT” (p.193).

A communicative approach increases the interest of students in language learning because the learning process becomes more vivid; it is especially effective in teaching bilingual students Sanchez (2015). It becomes interesting by integrating authentic materials. CLT approach advocates and urges designing curricula and activities that focuses on collaboration between peers. Students who learn to work and play collaboratively with classmates from different cultural backgrounds are more competent for the world they will encounter in their present lives or the future. When the communicative approach is applied widely, students begin using English more fluently and faster than students with a similar initial level of language competence, when other methods are applied. Clarke and Silberstein (1977) thus argue that classroom activities should parallel the natural world as closely as possible. Since language is a communication tool, methods and materials should concentrate on the message and not the medium.

Miller (2014) explains language acquisition occurs faster through the natural communication process in real life situations. It entails the constant practice of language use during contact in the target language, and during the application of a communicative approach. A communicative approach establishes a direct bond between the experience and the expression to the extent that students may overcome difficulties or even disabilities that interfere with the learning process and may prevent a successful language acquisition Erevelles(2005).

**Functional Grammar in a Communicative Approach**

According to Crystal (2003), functional grammar is a term that was first introduced in the 1970s as an alternative to the abstract, formalized view of language presented by teaching grammar explicitly. Michael Halliday developed Functional grammar in the 1960s and introduced it as a type of grammar that relies on a pragmatic view of language as social interaction. Halliday (1994) defines functional grammar as “a natural grammar in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used” (p.33). It focuses on enhancing EFL students’ communicative abilities and providing an opportunity for them to recognize the linguistic features of the language, which they need to learn for success at school Schleppegrell (2004). The view of the target language in this approach is as a means for communication in particular social contexts. The functional grammar differs from traditional grammar, it views language as a meaning-making resource rather than as a set of rules. The functional approach presents a new
division of teaching content into notions and functions abiding by the learner’s specific needs in a foreign context.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper reviews and explores the impact of language theories on grammar teaching. It links grammar teaching methodologies with linguistic language theories, roots of language learning theories and how they are adopted in teaching English grammar. Grammar presentations in most EFL textbooks, syllabi, and classes are still based on the Behaviorism theory. Behaviorism theory reflects the traditional approach or the explicit instruction of grammar. Traditional teaching approach, or what is called the deductive approach, is based on theories of learning, such as Behaviorism and Cognitive Code theories. There are different methods of teaching grammar that draw on the Behaviorism theory such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method (DM), Situational Language Teaching (SLT), and the audio-lingual method. The most appropriate methods for ensuring the success of teaching foreign languages coupled with the reflection of the various methods used in the teaching process are very vital. Nowadays, there is a trend toward adopting Constructivism theory and communicative approach in designing English textbooks. However, there is still a misconception regarding applying this theory in the actual teaching practice. While there are learners who can acquire language solely through gaining its understanding. In such a case, if comprehensive input really exists, students can acquire a second language without the need to be taught grammar since learners can acquire such forms in a natural way mainly through meaning. Some scientists believe that teaching grammar has a tangential outcome on learning a language. However, an emphasis has been put on grammar acquisition as the key consideration in teaching language to second language learners. Others argue that acquired grammar serves as a means of production whereas the learned system is responsible for monitoring and only helpful when learners have time to check the accuracy of their language output. Taking into consideration that maintains that the development of linguistic structures cannot be achieved in the absence of teaching grammar, some other scientists argued that language fluency was a function of acquisition. Their beliefs hinged on the proposition that grammar teaching does not result in the acquisition of structures since conscious learning takes place and conscious knowledge only serves as an editor or monitor of already acquired structures.

About the Author

Dr. Asma Alqahtani is an assistant professor of TESOL at the University of Jeddah, English Institute. She holds a masters in TESOL and doctorate degrees in TESOL /Curriculum and Instruction from America, Murray State University. Her research interests lie in the areas of Second Language Acquisition and grammar teaching and processing. Alqahtani has experience teaching English as a foreign language in several contexts, including mm Al-Qura University, Nashville/ Tennessee English Center, and Murray State University. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8723-7945
References


