

How Communicative are Grammar Exercises

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....	3
2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	4
3 Communicative Criteria for Assessing Grammar Activities	4
4 Analysis of Grammar Exercises	6
4.1. Exercise 1	6
4.2. Exercise 2	7
4.3. Exercise 3	8
4.4. Exercise 4	10
5 Conclusion.....	12
6 Bibliography.....	13

1 Introduction

Teaching materials are a key component in foreign language learning programs. They serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive as well as for the language practice that occurs in the classroom (Richards, Renenandya, 2002: 65). Analyzing teaching materials, selecting materials that will facilitate and support language learning best, adapting chosen material in order to make it more efficient are thus important skills that every language teacher should develop.

In this paper I will be analysing a particular type of teaching material – grammar exercises. Every analysis of this type has to be based on some learning theory and reflect an approach to language teaching. Since my analysis will be based on the Communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) I will first give a short account of the main aspects of CLT and look into its view of grammar. I will then explain the criteria according to which I am going to assess grammar exercises. I plan to focus on the communicative criteria and communicative aspect of grammar exercises and see how this element contributes to the overall effectiveness of an exercise. My analysis will be carried out on if-clauses exercises taken from *Way to Go 4 Workbook*, *Friends 3 Coursebook*, *Snapshot Workbook* and *New Headway Intermediate Workbook*. I have chosen one item of grammar (if-clauses) so that I could analyse how the communicative element of grammar exercises changes in exercises designed to support different learning stages.

The basic premise, with which I start my analysis, is that the communicative element of grammar exercise should be stronger and more prominent in exercises supporting more advanced learning stages, i.e. that we should expect grammar exercises supporting the performance stage to be most communicative.

Kommentar [D. 1]: Interesting idea

2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative approach to language teaching dates from the late 1970s and derives from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes linguistics, educational research, psychology, philosophy, sociology. (Savignon, 2001: 16). It sets as its goal the elaboration and implementation of programs that will promote the development of communicative competence. Communicative competence can be defined as “the ability to use language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals” (<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/goalsmethods/goal.htm>). The aim of CLT is to enable students to communicate competently and efficiently in a foreign language, not to reach native-like proficiency for that is not deemed an attainable goal.

The goal of CLT results from the view of language, not as a system of forms and structures, but as a means of communicating messages between human beings in actual contexts. Grammar is recognised as a way of expressing certain types of meaning through grammatical forms. (Newby, 1998: 1). Grammatical competence means not only knowing the rules of formation and usage of certain grammatical forms but the ability to choose meaningful grammar in real contexts.

According to CLT, in order for students to obtain grammatical competence, and the more general communicative competence, real-life conditions of language use should be replicated in the classroom (Newby, 1998: 3). In the following section we shall look into the way how real-life conditions of communication can be reflected in grammar exercises, i.e. we shall try to define what makes a grammar exercise communicative.

3 Communicative Criteria for Assessing Grammar Activities

According to Newby (2010: 23), communicative grammar activities can be defined on the basis of the following principles:

1. Clear and realistic context (grammar arises from a specific situation)
2. Realistic use / processing of language (grammar is regarded as communication)
3. Meaning and meaningfulness of grammar is stressed (grammar is used to express ideas)
4. Personalisation (students link grammar to their own knowledge, ideas, experience, wishes, etc.)
5. Open-ended exercises (grammar is a part of a creative process)
6. Task-based (grammar is used to reach a goal)
7. Integrated skills (grammar works with other linguistic systems to create meaning)
8. Motivation (students find the exercise fun and engaging)

Of course, an exercise doesn't have to address all of the above mentioned principles in order to be classified as communicative. There exists no simple distinction between 'communicative' and 'non - communicative' activities. But it can be said that the more of the above principles a grammar activity includes, the more communicative it is (Newby, 2010: 23).

In the following section I will look at a number of grammar exercises and with the help of the above mentioned criteria decide how communicative they are. I will also take into consideration the cognitive parameters of chosen exercises (i.e. learning stage, depth of processing) in order to see to which extent does the communicative dimension contribute to the effectiveness of an exercise within the overall process of learning.

4 Analysis of Grammar Exercises

4.1. Exercise 1

The first exercise that I will analyse is taken from *Way to Go 4 Workbook*. This is the first exercise in the Workbook that deals with First conditional sentences which have been introduced in *Way to Go 4 Coursebook*.

(Breka, O., Mardešić. M. 2001: 97)

Name of the activity: Superstitions

Type of activity: Written matching exercise

Grammatical objective: Form: first conditional sentences

Function: expressing (superstitious) belief

Learning objective: To understand how first conditional sentences are formed and how they can be used to express superstitious belief

Learning stage: awareness - conceptualisation

Kommentar [D. 2]: I don't think there is any conceptualisation here as there is not enough focus on the grammar .

Communicative principles: It is difficult to give a “communicative” stamp to this exercise. We could perhaps argue that the meaning of grammar is ✓✓ stressed and that personalisation criteria is to a degree fulfilled (students are encouraged to link grammar to culture and to compare superstitions from their own culture to the ones in the British culture), but all the other communicative principles are missing

Pedagogical principles: The exercise ✓✓ supports learning rather than tests learning. ✓✓ Dual processing is included; the exercise requires from the students to focus on the language, to take in a new item of grammar, but it also requires from them to bring in their knowledge about the world in order to solve it successfully.

Comments: Although this exercise cannot be called communicative, I still think it is a solid exercise. It urges the students to focus on a new grammatical concept, i.e.

first conditional sentences. They are prompted to use their ✓✓ schematic knowledge, i.e. their knowledge of folk superstitions in order to make hypotheses about the rules which underlie this new piece of grammar. The exercise therefore fulfils the proposed learning aim and is adequate for the targeted learning stage. I have noted that other Coursebooks and Workbooks (*Friends, New Headway Intermediate, Snapshot*) also begin to deal with if-clauses with a similar matching exercise. I believe this is a good grammar activity for the awareness/conceptualization learning stage. We shouldn't expect grammar exercises to fulfil a lot of communicative criteria **at this point.**

Kommentar [D. 3]: What would be interesting would be what exercise comes next. How is conceptualisation strengthened?

4.2. Exercise 2

The second exercise is taken from *Snapshot Workbook*. This is the third exercise in this Workbook that deals with if-clauses. It appears after a matching exercise similar to the one we have just analysed, and an expansion exercise.

(Mavar, A., Crnić, S., Barker, C., Abbs, B, Freebarin, I, Johnston, O. 1999: 45)

Name of the activity: First conditional: *if/unless* clause + 'll (*will*), *may* or *might*

Type of activity: written complete the sentences exercise

Grammatical objective: form: first conditional sentences

notion: possibility

Learning objective: to practice the possibility notion of first conditional sentences

Learning stage: ✓✓ proceduralisation

Kommentar [D. 4]: Also understanding difference between 'if' and 'unless'

Communicative principles: I would say this exercise ✓✓ does stress the authentic processing of language as well as the meaningfulness of grammar. It is an open-ended exercise which invites students to be creative and to link grammar with their own ideas. I think students will thus be motivated to complete this exercise. It appears the exercise fulfils five out of eight communicative criteria, so we can label it as communicative.

Pedagogical principles: The exercise ✓✓ supports learning rather than tests learning. It requires from students to use both their linguistic and schematic knowledge; dual processing is included.

Comments: I believe this exercise fulfils the proposed learning objective and that it is suitable for the proceduralisation learning stage. The exercise ✓✓ moves on from declarative to procedural grammatical knowledge and helps to create a bridge between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Although the exercise is communicative, I think it can be made even more communicative by integration of other linguistic skills. This could be done by making this exercise an oral and a group one. Students should be divided into groups. The first student in the group finishes the first sentence. The next student takes the proposed ending and creates a new sentence. Students thus create a chain of events.

Kommentar [D. 5]: Excellent idea!

e.g. If I've got enough money next summer, I'll buy myself a car.

If I buy myself a car, I will go on a road trip.

When the first chain is finished, i.e. when everyone in the group makes one sentence, the group moves on to the next unfinished sentence. The exercise can have a written follow-up. The students can be asked to complete the sentences for themselves for homework.

4.3. Exercise 3

The third exercise is taken from *New Headway Intermediate Workbook*. This exercise focuses on the Second conditional sentences.

(Soars, Liz & John 1996: 49)

Name of the activity: Conditionals (2) and *would*

Type of activity: sentence transformation

Grammatical objective: form: second conditional sentences

notion: impossibility

Learning objective: to practice the impossibility notion of second conditional sentences

Learning stage: proceduralisation

Communicative principles: The exercise fulfils none of the communicative criteria in my opinion. It doesn't provide a clear context nor emphasize the authentic processing of language. Instead it requires from the students to process grammar as mathematics. The exercise doesn't stress the meaningfulness of grammar; it doesn't support students' creativity or individuality. It is not open-ended, or task-based and it will not motivate students.

Pedagogical principles: ✓✓ The exercise tests learning rather than supports learning. It is a "do you know" rather than "can you use" activity. Dual processing is not included – the exercise requires only the linguistic knowledge from the students.

Comments: This exercise has a similar aim as the previously analysed one (the difference is only in the type of conditional sentences they deal with), and should support the same learning stage – proceduralisation. However, this exercise is far less successful in reaching this aim ✓✓. I do not believe this exercise creates a bridge from declarative to procedural knowledge, from linguistic competence to linguistic performance. It also doesn't fulfil any of the communicative criteria. When two activities support the same learning stage, communicative criteria may help us to decide which activity to choose. I would thus definitely choose the former

Kommentar [D. 6]: Actually, it is not transformation but reformulation. This means that students have to process the idea.

activity. How can we make this exercise more communicative and improve it? I
would propose to leave just **one part of each sentence in the exercise:**

Kommentar [D. 7]: Very good idea!

e.g. We haven't got any money.

I don't know the answer.

The students could then be asked to think of what could be done if the facts
expressed in these sentences were not true.

e.g. If we had some money we could go to a F1 Grand Prix.

4.4. Exercise 4

The fourth and the last exercise that will be analysed in this paper comes
from *Friends 3 Coursebook*. If-clauses were already introduced in *Friends 2
Coursebook* so we should expect this exercise to support a more advanced
learning stage.

(Katzböck, S., Martinjak, S., Rosenberg, M., Wingate, J. 2009: 18)

Name of the activity: Time travel

Type of activity: group discussion followed by a written task

Grammatical objective: from: conditional sentences
notion: impossibility

Learning objective: to help learners to use conditional sentences in actual contexts, not only in pedagogically structured exercises

Learning stage: ✓✓ proceduralisation - performance

Communicative principles: Almost all communicative criteria are fulfilled in this exercise. It has a clear context and stresses the meaningfulness of grammar. Students process the language authentically; they are encouraged to link grammar to their own knowledge and ideas and to be creative. The exercise integrates different linguistic skills and is, I believe, motivating for the students. The exercise doesn't satisfy the criterion 6, it is not task-based.

Pedagogical principles: The exercise is designed for learning, not testing. Dual processing is emphasized; the students are expected to use both their linguistic and their schematic knowledge.

Comments: As expected, we find almost all communicative criteria satisfied in this exercise which supports the advanced proceduralisation-performance learning stage. The exercise is not as scaffolded as the previous ones. The students are given a task and more or less left to themselves to accomplish it. In this way students are being prepared for processing language in real-time and using it in actual contexts.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed a number of grammar exercises in order to see how communicative they are. I also explored how the communicative aspect contributes to the overall effectiveness of grammar exercises.

I concluded that although communicative criteria are very useful for assessing the extent to which an exercise reflects real-life use of language, they are not sufficient in evaluating the effectiveness of an exercise within the overall process of learning. In order to do that we also need to take into account the cognitive criteria.

Different types of grammar activities are most efficient on different learning stages. Grammar activities designed for the awareness and conceptualization learning stage, which require from students to focus on a new item of grammar and discover the principles underlying it, are mostly receptive, and it is not necessary that they fulfil a lot or any of the communicative criteria. Grammar activities supporting the proceduralisation and performance stage, on the other hand, should be more communicative for they should prepare the students for real-life use of language. When two exercises support the same learning stage, and have the same grammatical and learning objective, then communicative criteria can guide us as to which exercise to choose.

In the end, I would once more like to emphasize that it is very important for teachers to approach grammar exercises (as well as all teaching material) critically. We should analyse, evaluate and choose grammar exercises carefully in order to help our students to learn foreign language most efficiently.

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