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The role of consciousness and sub-consciousness in teaching of grammar in ELT

Selin Ozdemir^{a*}, Balikesir University, 10145 Balikesir, Turkey

Fatih Yavuz^b, Balikesir University, 10145 Balikesir, Turkey

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Abstract

Teaching grammar has been regarded as one of the most crucial issues in the field of language. It gains its importance since it helps learners attain high level of accuracy and proficiency in language learning processes. During these processes, the way of teaching grammar differs under some certain circumstances and is divided into some sub-categories such as conscious grammar teaching and subconscious grammar teaching. In this study, a literature review of issues on the role of consciousness and sub-consciousness in teaching of grammar has been widely discussed since there are numerous views, claims and approaches related to choosing one of them as an ideal way to teach grammar. Both of them have a significant impact on the knowledge of grammar. The study revealed that neither conscious grammar teaching which lays emphasis on the structures and rules of a language nor subconscious grammar teaching without attention to explicit knowledge of grammar should be neglected.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, consciousness, sub-consciousness, deductive, inductive.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Selin Ozdemir**, Graduate Student, Balikesir University, 10145 Balikesir, Turkey.
E-mail address: selin.1412@hotmail.com /

1. Introduction

The status of grammar teaching, which plays a significant role in the process of learning, has become one of the most controversial issues in the field of foreign language research. Despite the arguments on grammar teaching, knowledge of grammar has gained its prominence in learning processes since it accounts for proficiency of a language. In this respect, it is impossible to refer language without notions of grammar.

According to Ellis's (2006) definition, grammar teaching consists of any helpful technique which helps learners pay attention to some specific rules and structures of a language in a way that leads to figure out and practice them to internalise them. This definition implies how grammar teaching is an inevitable and integral aspect of the field of language and holds a central position in a foreign language learning setting. Nevertheless, there are some issues to be discussed related to teaching of grammar in English Language Teaching (ELT) which are concerned with determining the ideal way to teach grammar. The questions of 'What is the best way to teach grammar in ELT?' has not been thoroughly answered yet. There are numerous perspectives and approaches which have different requirements and suggestions to constitute grammar teaching. Some of these perspectives discuss the role of consciousness and sub-consciousness in teaching of grammar in ELT. Many ideas have been put forward about whether grammar should be taught consciously, with a specific attention on the rules of a structure, or subconsciously without explicit attention to the rules of grammar knowledge. This study aims to present the views on the role of consciousness and sub-consciousness in grammar teaching and demonstrate the findings in this study.

McLaughlin (1990) has asserted that defining the role of consciousness and sub-consciousness in teaching of grammar are challenging since both of the terms include many conflict meanings which make them ambiguous. Furthermore, there are many approaches which believe that conscious grammar teaching facilitates learning process, whereas the others hold the view that unconscious teaching is a necessary condition for learning to occur. These inconstant approaches related to grammar teaching lead many hypotheses and ideas to be revealed.

In this respect, Krashen (1987, p. 10) puts forward the difference between two terms: 'acquisition' and 'learning'. Acquisition is a subconscious process in which learners expose the structure of a language and internalise the rules of grammar; whereas learning is a conscious process in which learners specifically pay attention to the rules of grammar knowledge and try to comprehend them through explicit grammar exercises. Krashen (1987) also claims that conscious knowledge can't be converted into unconscious knowledge. Krashen's (1992) Input Hypothesis asserts that language is acquired through understanding the messages in a language context. Comprehensible input, which should be beyond the current level of learners, has a vital place in language acquisition. However, learning demands one more vital notion which is readiness to learn a language. It means that learners should maintain a low affective filter to achieve language learning successfully.

Despite Krashen's support for sub-conscious grammar teaching, Schmidt (1990) believes that conscious knowledge is required to constitute effective grammar teaching. According to his theories (1990, 1994), there are some terms which should be noted to discuss on consciousness such as awareness, attention and intention. Awareness is one of the central factors for grammar teaching to occur since one has to notice a specific feature in input to achieve acquiring. In addition to awareness, attention has also a respectable place in grammar teaching. It is relied on the conversion of input to intake as well as its contribution to appearance of long-term memory storage. Intention is an ambiguous term which lays emphasis on the fact that learners are required to pay attention to something to learn. However, intention should be supported with motivation of learners through appropriate activities which facilitate the teaching of grammar. Such activities are called as consciousness raising activities which help learners aware of language that they can't achieve on their own. One of these activities is called as 'discovery activities' in which learners try to formulate a rule

from numerous examples of some grammar knowledge on their own. Hence, learners have opportunities to increase their awareness of rules and comprehend the input.

Numerous views and claims have been put forward to unveil the difference between conscious grammar teaching and sub-conscious grammar teaching. All of these arguments lead to appear some theoretical frameworks which aim to demonstrate how both kinds of grammar teaching differ in the field of language ranging from explicit and implicit knowledge to intentional and incidental learning.

This study was conducted to seek the answers for following research questions:

- i. Is there any ideal way to teach grammar in ELT?
- ii. Does it make significance difference when grammar is taught consciously or sub-consciously?

2. Literature review

2.1. What is grammar?

Grammar has been regarded as crucial to the language teaching since it accounts for proficiency and fluency. Numerous studies have attached great importance to grammar teaching and there are many definitions related to grammar teaching. According to Thornbury (1999), grammar decides what forms and structures are appropriate in a language to express particular meanings. Thornbury (2004) also adds that grammar deals with how sentences are formed and becomes meaningful utterances. Dykes (2007, p. 5), on the other hand, defines grammar as ‘a language to talk about language’. This definition supports the view that grammar is an inevitable part of the language and one’s ability to use language sufficiently will be constrained without accurate knowledge of grammar. According to Ur (1988), it is required to have a good knowledge of grammar that one has to know how to apply grammatical rules and how sentence patterns should be put together. It means that grammar should lay emphasis on meanings as well as rules and structures. Similarly, Widodo (2006) states that grammar focuses on structures and patterns without ignoring the sentence meaning. These definitions imply that grammatical rules should be transformed into learner’s real life environment.

2.2. Consciousness and sub-consciousness in methods in ELT

A look into the history of the language indicates that there are numerous methods which have different goals and suggestions to teach and learn a language. All of these methods are separated from each other in terms of the ideas they put forward and their perspectives toward language processes. For instance, some of the methods in ELT support consciousness in teaching of grammar whereas the others hold a view that grammar should be taught subconsciously.

An example of method which supports conscious grammar teaching is grammar translation method (GTM). In GTM, all of the rules in the target language are presented explicitly and directly and this method puts consciousness at the centre of learning. Another example is that Suggestopedia also underlines the significance of explicit grammar teaching, which takes relaxation, decoration and music into consideration, without neglecting implicit knowledge of grammar. However, there also methods which believe that sub-conscious teaching is essential to acquire knowledge of grammar. For instance, audio-lingual method, the first scientific method, regards language learning as a habit formation and relies on inducing grammatical rules through controlled exercises. In addition to audio-lingual method, The Silent Way developed by Caleb Gattegno helps to make the learners highly involved in activities and focuses on discovery and problem solving which are important notions in sub-conscious grammar teaching. Furthermore, Total Physical Response also stresses the importance of sub-conscious teaching since learners acquire language sub-consciously through imperative forms. The communicative approach which is concerned with fluency proposes that the language acquired in a natural process sub-consciously helps learners interact with others, create their own perspectives and express their attitudes.

2.3. Intentional and incidental learning

There are two popular perspectives to achieve learning structures and patterns of grammar: intentional and incidental learning. Intentional learning holds the view that there is a deliberate focus on form and memorisation of grammatical structures and vocabularies (Hulstijn, 2003; Ko, 1995). In such a type of learning, learners need to know the aim of the task and intentional stimuli before they engage in the task. In incidental learning, on the other hand, which puts emphasis on unconscious knowledge of grammar, learners' attention is on meaning rather than form of the language (Hulstijn, 2003; Ko, 1995). Learners acquire grammatical structures through communicative activities and noticing the cues. There are also some different views related to intentional learning and incidental learning. For instance, Schmidt (1990) proposes that incidental learning through communicative interactions isn't sufficient to learn a language since learners' lack grammatical competence without intention to learn.

2.4. Attention and noticing

Attention is an essential issue for learning a foreign language and has a great impact on the process of teaching grammar. Attention accounts for encoding language input and constituting long-term memory storage (Robinson, 2003; Schmidt, 1995). It is one of the key components of learning and plays a vital role for grammatical input to become intake (van Lier, 1994). This means that attention helps learners notice a specific knowledge of grammar to achieve attaining it. It is divided into two groups as selective attention and divided attention (Schmidt, 1995). In selective attention, learners pay attention to one piece of information such as a particular rule of grammatical structure, whereas in divided attention, learners have to deal with more than one task simultaneously.

Noticing is considered as a crucial factor for language learning and to be responsible for the conversion of input to intake which means the input noticed by the learners (Ellis, 1994; Schmidt, 1990). It implies that learners tend to notice a specific feature in input before learning what is expected to be attained such as a grammatical rule of a structure. Fotos (1998, p. 387 as cited in Jin, 2011, p. 129) defines that 'noticing has thus been suggested to perform an interfacing function between the development of explicit knowledge of a feature through formal instruction and the eventual acquisition of that feature—the development of implicit knowledge'. This means that noticing helps learners enhance their explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge through formal instructions. Schmidt (1990) also proposes that there are some situations which have an influence on noticing such as expectation which underlines a clear instruction evoking noticing, frequently used items and perceptual salience which underlines an outstanding input.

2.5. Explicit and implicit grammar teaching

There are two kinds of grammar teaching which deserve a great attention in learning a foreign language: explicit grammar teaching and implicit grammar teaching. Explicit grammar teaching can be defined as a conscious knowledge of grammatical rules which are accessed through formal instructions and controlled processing when learners have difficulty in applying L2 (Ellis, 2006; Han & Ellis, 1998; Macaro & Masterman, 2006; Widodo, 2006). Explicit knowledge of grammar is learnable which means that learners can attain the rules and structures in controlled practices and verbalisable (Ellis, 2006). It is divided into two categories as analysed knowledge and meta-linguistic explanation or metalanguage (Ellis, 2006; Han & Ellis, 1998). Analysed knowledge refers to awareness of function of a structure and is required in activities which are concerned with linguistic forms. Metalanguage, on the other hand, puts emphasis on comprehending explanations of grammatical rules.

Implicit teaching of grammar greatly contributes to improve communicative skills in which the input is more than verbally expressed. Learners internalise the rules and structures of a grammatical knowledge through communicative tasks without awareness (Ellis, 2006; Widodo, 2006). Implicit

teaching can't be analysed since learners acquire language unconsciously (Han & Ellis, 1998). Reber (1989) defines implicit learning as an unconscious process which involves inducing structures of grammar in a natural environment and Reber (1989, p. 229) also adds that 'implicitly acquired knowledge is completely unconscious, it is not misleading to argue that the implicitly acquired epistemic contents of mind are always richer and more sophisticated than what can be explicated'. It means that implicit grammar teaching is taught to be powerful than explicit teaching in terms of finding and discovering hidden aspects of the task.

2.6. Deductive and inductive approach in grammar

Deductive and inductive grammar teaching are two different approaches which can be applied in a language learning setting. Firstly, deductive approach, which is also called as rule-driven learning, emphasises conscious knowledge of grammar teaching. In deductive approach, grammar is taught from general to specific (Widodo, 2006). In this respect, learners are presented some grammatical rules and examples explicitly and then, learners are required to apply the rules. It should be noted that Michael Swan (cited in Thornbury, 1999, p. 32) underlines some issues when the rule is presented to learners. Among them are: the rules should be accurate, the rules should demonstrate the limitation of the use of a form, the rules should be away from ambiguity, the rules should be familiar to learners and the rules should be relevant to learners' needs.

Secondly, inductive approach, which is also called as rule-discovery learning, teaches grammar from specific to general (Widodo, 2006). This means that learners are asked to discover and formulate grammatical rules through examples and tasks. Inductive grammar teaching is considered to be crucial since it requires active involvement of learners (Ke, 2008). In inductive grammar teaching, learners have to generalise and internalise the rules from examples and to check whether their hypotheses are correct rather than imitating and memorising them (Ke, 2008).

3. Conclusion

This study was conducted to present a literature review of issues which are concerned with consciousness and sub-consciousness in grammar teaching in ELT and unveil some facts related to grammar teaching. It is confirmed that consciousness and sub-consciousness has always been controversial and this has led to many hypotheses and approaches from incidental and intentional learning to deductive and inductive approaches. All of them imply that neither conscious grammar teaching nor sub-conscious grammar teaching should be neglected since they have great contributions to learners' progress and development in the process of grammar learning.

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