A Profile of an Effective EFL Grammar Teacher

Sasan Baleghizadeh

Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Beheshti University, G.C., Tehran, Iran
Email: sasanbaleghizadeh@yahoo.com

Mohammad Amin Mozaheb

English Department, Khatam University, Tehran, Iran
Email: mozaheb.ma@gmail.com

Abstract—**Grammar teaching dates back to many years ago. It is a critical issue since its importance has been clarified in second/foreign language teaching and learning. There are always some hints about a good grammar teacher, but one cannot easily find a holistic framework for a successful ESL/EFL grammar teacher. For this reason, the present study investigates the qualities of a good and effective grammar teacher based on observations and interviews. An Iranian EFL grammar teacher's class was observed for about ten hours in order to see why his students and colleagues considered him to be a successful English grammar teacher. The results demonstrate that there are some important features for an effective ESL/EFL grammar teacher, which should be taken into account by other practitioners doing a similar job. Finally, this study provides a coherent framework for grammar teachers in order to make the outcome of their grammar lessons more fruitful.**

Index Terms—**implicit grammar teaching, explicit grammar teaching, effective grammar teaching, successful grammar teacher**

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar teaching has always been a matter of heated debate among language teaching professionals. Depending on various methods, grammar teaching has had its ups and downs in recent decades. For instance, in the Grammar Translation Method, form was the central aspect of learning, while in the Direct Method and Natural Approach grammar had a marginalized role (Brown, 2001). At present, the debate is centered on task-based teaching of grammar and consciousness raising activities, in addition to the role noticing, play an important part in grammar instruction (Fotos, 1994; 2005). In order to know the essential knowledge base for an effective ESL/EFL grammar teacher, it is necessary to briefly review some key concepts in grammar teaching.

When we say grammar, we mean a set of rules with which each individual can make sentences in a language. Brown (2001, p. 362) defines grammar as "the system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence…Technically grammar refers to sentence-level rules only, and not rules governing the relationship among sentences, which we refer to as discourse rules." Celce-Murcia (1991, p. 465) meticulously draws a chart in which the importance of grammar for adults and children is shown based on different categories like the learners' age, their proficiency level, educational background, etc. In the following figure, one can see different variables which were highlighted in her model.

Learner Variables	Less important	Focus on Form	More Important
Age	Children	Adolescents	Adults
Proficiency level	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Educational background	Preliterate No formal Education	Semiliterate Some formal education	Literate Well-Educated
Instructional variables			
Skill	Listening, Reading	Speaking	Writing
Register	Informal	Consultative	Formal
Need/Use	Survival	Vocational	Professional

Figure 1. Variables that determine the importance of grammar (from Celce-Murcia, 1991)

What can be inferred from the above figure is that grammar is important for both adults and children. More important than the mentioned categories for the importance of grammar is the difference between inductive and deductive approaches to grammar teaching. For a long time, the pendulum of ESL/EFL grammar teaching has been swinging between the dichotomy of inductive and deductive approaches. To put it simply, in the inductive approach, the teacher first presents different examples of the target language form and the students should discover the rules themselves. On the other hand, when utilizing the deductive approach, a rule is explicitly introduced by the teacher and the students should practice it through different examples. Some ESL/EFL practitioners prefer to use a deductive approach, while others stick to an inductive one. A new trend in recent years is the mixed method approach in which both deductive and inductive ways of teaching are combined.

A new line of research in the domain of grammar teaching is concerned with the distinction often made between focus on forms and focus on form. In this respect, Harmer (2007, p. 53) points out that:

Focus on form occurs when students direct their conscious attention to some feature of the language, such as a verb tense or the organization of paragraphs… It will occur naturally when students try to complete communicative tasks… in Task-based learning…. Focus on form is often incidental and opportunistic, growing out of tasks which students are involved in, rather than being pre-determined by a book or syllabus. Many language syllabuses and course books are structured around a series of language forms, however. Teachers and students focus on them one by one because they are on the syllabus. This is often called "focus on forms" because one of the chief organizing principles behind a course is the learning of these forms.

Although focus on form has recently been considered as a working strategy for teaching grammar, there are some scholars who are strictly against it. For instance, Sheen (2003, p. 225) believes that "an underlying assumption of a focus on form approach is that all classroom activities need to be based on communicative tasks, and that any treatment of grammar should arise from difficulties in communicating any desired meaning." However, Ellis (2006) argues that "the grammar taught should be one that emphasizes not just form but also the meanings", and that focus on forms is valid, provided that students are given chances to use the discrete forms they have studied in communication tasks. However, it is clear that "an incidental focus-on-form approach is of special value because it affords an opportunity for extensive treatment of grammatical problems (in contrast to the intensive treatment afforded by a focus on forms approach)" (p. 102).

One of the common ways of focusing on form is "noticing", a concept introduced by Schmidt (1990). Harmer (2007, p. 54) stresses that "noticing is a condition which is necessary for if the language a student is exposed to is to become… language that he or she takes in." Besides, Lynch (2001, p. 125) contends that "Noticing is certainly part of successful language learning; one can hardly imagine (adult) learners making substantial progress without it."

In addition to noticing; implicit methodological techniques can be regarded as another influential strategy for teaching grammar. Ellis (2003) maintains that these techniques involve providing feedback on learners' use of the target feature in a manner that maintains the meaning-centeredness of the task. In effect, this involves the strategic use of the negotiation of meaning…[They provide] a way of teaching grammar communicatively because the opportunities to reformulate deviant utterances occur in the context of trying to communicate and because the learners are not aware that the teacher is intentionally focusing on form (p. 167).

It is also important to note that in addition to implicit methodological techniques for teaching grammar, there are explicit methodological techniques which can be categorized as pre-emptive and responsive. In the former "the teacher draws attention to the targeted feature by asking a question or by making a metalingual comment [while] a *responsive focus* occurs through negative feedback involving explicit attention to the targeted feature" (Ellis, 2003, p. 170).

All of the above mentioned features are important to be fully understood by a good grammar teacher. In other words, a good teacher should know about different approaches to grammar teaching. As a matter of fact, an effective grammar teacher should be aware of the role of grammar and the historical issues in grammar teaching in order to use them at proper times. As Sasson (2007) postulates, the role of grammar needs to be demythisized in today's ESL/EFL classroom.There is too much speculation that students will gain a new grammatical structure simply by noticing it and writing down its rules. Learning to understand its complexity is part of the problem. The other part is how to embark on teaching it. Generally speaking, a good language teacher needs to possess some critical characteristics to be regarded an expert in his or her discipline. Given this, Tsui (2003, p.247) identifies three dimensions for expert language teachers: (a) How they relates to the act of teaching, and the extent to which they integrate or dichotomize the various aspects of teacher knowledge in the teaching act, (b) how they relate to specific contexts of work, and the extent to which they are able to perceive and open up possibilities that do not present themselves as such in their specific contexts of work, and (c) the extent to which they are able to theorize the knowledge generated by their personal practical experience as a teacher and to put theoretical knowledge into practice.

There are also some other characteristics which are essential for a good language teacher, i.e. being a good manager, being patient, being enthusiastic, being flexible, intelligent, to name but a few. In the light of the previously mentioned points, the authors of the present study intend to find the characteristics of a good EFL grammar teacher. A large number of research studies have been carried out on the effective ways of teaching grammar; however, a lack of focus on teachers themselves is obvious in most of these studies. What is it that effective teachers do in their grammar classes and what teaching and learning behaviors can an observer expect to see in the teaching practice of a good grammar teacher? It is this that the present paper is concerned with.

The idea of good or effective teaching is still a vague concept for the TEFL community members. In addition, classroom situation plays a key role in this regard. As van Lier (1998, p. 23) maintains, "We thus have the curious situation that most second language acquisition theorizing ignores the L2 classroom as a relevant source of data and as relevant place to apply findings." In the case of classroom based research, only those aspects of a teacher's behavior which are quantifiable seem to have been taken into account by researchers. Such research reflects a quantitative approach to the study of teaching.

Qualitative and quantitative approaches to research are both important for ESL/EFL research studies. It is also important to note that qualitative research studies are interpretive in nature and researchers are in need of them in many

cases. As Mackey and Gass (2005, p. 2) claim "qualitative studies… are not set up as experiments; the data cannot be easily quantifiable… and the analysis is interpretive rather than statistical." Arriving at successful and effective decisions for teaching grammar is the main goal of the present study, which reports on a series of observations and interviews with an effective EFL grammar teacher.

II. The Present Study

The main goals of the present study were to use observation and interview techniques in order to learn more about EFL grammar teaching and develop a profile of an effective teacher. For Berliner (1984) and Blum (1984), the concept of effective teaching is a familiar topic in research on mainstream instruction. They define effective teachers as teachers whose learners achieve higher than expected levels of performance on standardized achievement tests. Moreover, reports of colleagues, supervisors, and faculty deans are utilized for selection of an effective teacher. In this study, there were a number of reasons for focusing on this particular teacher's class for about five sessions, some of which were:
1. The supervisors had a positive report on his teaching.
2. Compared with his colleagues who had taught grammar in university, he had a highly positive impression.
3. Students were all eager to participate in his classes.
4. The head of the department also regarded him as one of the successful teachers.

III. Research Question

Given the above mentioned issues on the purpose and significance of this study, the study sought to answer the following research question: What are the qualities of an effective EFL grammar teacher and how can an effective EFL grammar teacher help his or her students improve their grammar?

IV. Method

An EFL grammar teacher agreed to be observed on a regular schedule, to have some of his classes audio-taped, and to be interviewed. The objective behind the observations and recordings was to identify his techniques and also the underpinning structure of his success. The purpose of the interview was an investigation of his attitude toward grammar teaching and an analysis of his employed teaching strategies.

A. Participants

The teacher who participated in the present study had completed his Master's Degree in teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) at Tarbiat Modarres University in Tehran, Iran[*]. One of the classes he had taught several times was an advanced grammar course for undergraduate students. The class was held two sessions a week, each for about 90 minutes.

B. Procedure

Although the general goals of this course had been set in advance by Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technologies, the teacher had his own instructional objectives imparted to the students during the first session of the course. Some of the objectives included:
1. Using correct grammar in writing.
2. Editing sentences/paragraphs for specific grammar errors.
3. Writing original sentences/compositions to illustrate a specific aspect of a grammar point.
4. Providing students with a solid foundation in grammar to succeed in subsequent English courses.

The materials used in this class consisted of two main sections, a grammar book (*Communicate What You Mean: A Concise Advanced Grammar* by Carroll Washington Pollock) as the maincourse book and a book called *Common Mistakes*. It is also important to note that the course book was not the only material for teaching grammar in this class and the teacher himself provided students with additional materials in order to update their knowledge with new trends in grammar teaching.

C. Observation of a Lesson

In this part, one of the teacher's lessons based on an analysis of the audio recording and interviews will be elaborated on. The lesson discussed here occurred about the first few sessions of the semester. There were some activities in this lesson the main criteria of which were based on Ellis's (2002) viewpoints.

Ellis (2002, pp. 30-31) outlines five teaching activities to develop grammatical knowledge of a problematic feature:
1. Listening to comprehend: Students listen to comprehend a text that has been structured to contain several examples of the target form.
2. Listening to notice: Students listen to the same text again, but are given a gap-fill exercise. The target form is missing and the students simply fill it in exactly as they hear it to help them notice the form.

---

[*] Note: Special thanks go to Mr. Mansoori, who permitted us to observe his class.

3. Understanding the grammar point: With help from the teacher, the students analyze the data and "discover" the rule.

4. Checking: Students are given a written text containing errors and are asked to correct them.

5. Trying it: Students apply their knowledge in a production activity.

D. Notes on the Lesson

The lesson begins rapidly. The teacher gives a real life conversation to the students and reads it to them loudly. Then one of the students reads it again while the whole class is listening to her attentively. Meanwhile, the teacher asks some questions about the conversation e.g., where are these people? Or what do they do for a living? Simultaneously, the teacher tells students to open their books in which they can find a cloze test on the above mentioned conversation. Afterward, the teacher again reads the conversation and students should fill in the blanks as they hear them. The next step is the handouts in which students in groups should analyze the sample sentences and write a rule that describes the pattern they see. The next step is to discuss the rule with the whole class. Then students write the real rule and compare it with their own inferred rule. After the above steps, the teacher introduces the rule to the students and tells them about the past perfect. He shows them this tense through some charts and graphs while teaching them negative and question forms of this tense. Now it is the time for each student to make a sentence based on the aforementioned rule and for the teacher to write them on the board.

After finishing this section again the whole class starts a discussion and say why some of the sentences are right and some of them are wrong and need further modifications. Here is the script of this part:

T: Please tell me your examples, I mean sample sentences.

S1: by 10 P.M. he had finished his writing section.

T: Thanks. Next one, please.

S2: I had just started my IELTS test when my roommate got 8.5 in that test.

T: Okay, please the next one.

S: The child had eaten his lunch when his mother arrived at home.

This will continue till all students express their sentences and the class decide to eliminate or modify some of the sentences. The final section of this lesson consists of two sections. First the teacher tells students to write three sentences based on the newly learned structure and as the activity progresses, the teacher moves about, checking how they are working and answer any questions they may have. In the last section of the lesson, the teacher gives an authentic material (e.g., a short story, a newspaper editorial, part of a novel, etc.) to students and asks them to find the new tense. They have to work on this piece of text for the next session in order to practice the new structure much more.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The main aim of observing this teacher's class was to attempt to pinpoint the events of the classroom and why the teacher was considered to be a successful one. Description of a lesson is an easy job; however, interpretation and evaluation processes need more effort. The observer tries to avoid being subjective, merely describing his own values and standards. After analyzing the audio recordings of the class and also scrutinizing the written reports of each session, the following principles were taken out as the philosophical orientations and approaches of the teacher and the reasons why he was regarded as an effective EFL grammar teacher.

1. *The teacher is updated on new theories of grammar teaching and refers to them in the process of planning his teaching.* The teacher seems to be an avid reader, and he has enough knowledge about different methods and strategies in grammar teaching. He is experienced enough to follow needs analysis and newly accepted theories of grammar teaching .This issue is very important for all teachers and practitioners in the field of TEFL because the pace of advancement in science is very fast and new experiments are carried out in each day all over the world. It is incumbent upon the teacher to find new ways which can lend themselves to effective teaching, in this case, grammar instruction.

2. *Using authentic materials is a good source for motivating students.* Based on the observation, students are all eager to see what their teacher brings them to class as the new material. These materials include newspaper editorials, short stories, interesting texts retrieved from the Internet, etc. These materials are real life texts and students think that they have to know about them in today's life. There are always some students who like to prepare the required materials for teaching based on their interests. It is always a good idea to speak with students about their interests in order to be used for choosing authentic materials (e.g., in a class whose major is English literature, using Shakespeare's plays, modern short stories, and novels will be very interesting as useful resources for grammar teaching).

3. *Using graphs and charts is beneficial while teaching different tenses.* In a world in which, the pace of technological changes is breathtakingly fast, it seems essential to use computer made charts and figures in English classes. Grammar learning seems to be a boring process for many students, but the teacher can make it enjoyable by motivating them through the use of modern technological facilities. An effective teacher can prepare slide shows for teaching various tenses. In addition to using graphs, the teacher can also use short conversations in order to teach new structures. Students will gain a lot from the use of scripted movies in their grammar classes.

4. *Classroom discussions and debates are two fundamental techniques in consolidating the newly learned lesson.* A good grammar teacher should allocate enough time to classroom debates and discussions. This can facilitate the

learning of new materials because students are engaged in the actual performance of analyzing different samples and examples. A good teacher always asks students why a given sentence is right or wrong. In the following example based on the observation, one can easily see the use of this strategy by the teacher.

T: Neither coffee nor milk are suitable for me right now. Is it okay?

Class: thinking.

S1: we should change suitable because…

T: no, please be careful.

S2: *Are* should change to *is*.

T: Yes, right, *are* should come instead of *is*. So neither coffee nor milk is suitable for me right now.

5. *An effective grammar teacher always makes sure whether the instruction is clear enough for students to solve the problems or not.* The teacher ensures whether the purpose of the activities is clear for students or not. When students move into a new task, the allotted time is mentioned by the teacher to give students a time frame and an ending point. It is crucially important to explain the instructions in a simple way so that students understand what they are going to achieve through the given activity.

6. *Pair work, group work and even role play are supplementary activities for teaching grammar in a communicative way.* By using pair work or small group activities, students will learn the communicative aspects of newly learned structures, in addition to becoming familiar with the use of language in real life situation. Students can role play authentic conversations while the teacher plays the role of a counselor or resource person who answers their questions periodically. This can make the grammar class more motivating and more communicative. Another advantage of this technique is the internalization of the newly learned structure.

7. *Using mother tongue is sometimes necessary.* The use of mother tongue in foreign language classes can be regarded as a very helpful device in grammar teaching. The following example from the observation can highlight this point.

T: Neither money nor success is important to me.

S1: The sentence means that both of them are important?

T: No, this means that both of them are unimportant to me.

S1: but nor…. .

T: Let me ask the class, who can tell me about the translation of this structure?

Class: silent.

T: This can be translated as …. .

8. *A good grammar teacher should always summarize the whole session in the last ten minutes of the class and ask whether students encounter any problems or not.* This strategy can be very useful because it can make a coherent picture of the lesson for students. Most students believe that the summary section is very fruitful for them because in a short time they can review the whole session and they can also add the new knowledge to the old ones.

9. *A good grammar teacher should use an integrative approach toward teaching in different situations.* The teacher should not use a single method of grammar teaching in all his classes. The grammar teacher should be a good needs analyst and should be able to adapt himself/herself with different approaches to teaching.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Regarding the qualities of an effective grammar teacher mentioned above, one should bear in mind that communication can typically be regarded as the main outcome of grammar teaching in ESL/EFL situations. As Sasson (2007) points out, it is always easy for teachers to teach students to learn a set of rules; however, it is much more difficult to encourage them to use those rules for effective communication. Many of them suddenly find themselves unable to produce a meaningful sentence either about themselves or something that interests them.

When we figure out a good teacher, some qualities may promptly cross our minds such as patience and enthusiasm, to name but a few. But when we limit ourselves to only one aspect of teaching, i.e. grammar, there should be some other features which can be added to the general characteristics. Integrating both features can make a successful teacher. It is also important to note that when we limit ourselves to grammar teaching, there are many features and aspects for a good and ideal grammar teacher with regard to different classroom situations. As mentioned previously, the main purpose of the present study was to give a holistic framework about the qualities of a good grammar teacher in general. Hence, there are definitely some other features which may be ignored in this study and can be investigated in future studies.

This study was basically a qualitative research. However, as Dornyei (2007, p. 34) argues quantitative "proponents usually emphasize that at its best quantitative inquiry is systematic, rigorous, focused, and tightly controlled, involving precise measurement and producing reliable and replicable data that is generalizable to other concepts." Both kinds of these research methods are crucial and due to the nature of the study, one can use either quantitative method or qualitative method. As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 34) point out, "Qualitative and quantitative forms of research both have roles to play in theorizing." Due to the nature of the present study, a qualitative approach is appropriate here because the principles of effective grammar teaching cannot all be conveyed through operational terms but are strictly dependent upon the philosophical orientations behind grammar teaching and theories of second language teaching and learning. Collecting such information requires a qualitative approach, not a quantitative one. The reliability of such data

can be questioned but it can be regarded as a good source for understanding the nature of grammar teaching and learning.

All in all, the present study shows one bit of the whole. Further investigations in this regard seem to be necessary in order to find a coherent and well acceptable definition for an effective grammar teacher. We need to observe more teachers and more time should be designated to observations, attitudes of the teachers and learners. Researchers can also ask attitudes of the teachers toward grammar teaching in order to come up with a more thorough definition of the issue at hand. It is hoped that in near future, other researchers will focus on this issue as an important facet of TEFL.

REFERENCES

[1]   Berliner, D. (1984). The half-full glass: A review of research on teaching. In P. Hosford (Ed.), *Using what we know about teachers* (pp. 51-84). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
[2]   Blum, R. E. (1984). Effective schooling practices: a research synthesis. Portland, Ore: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
[3]   Brown, H. D. (2001). Teaching by principles: An integrative approach to language pedagogy. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
[4]   Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). Grammar pedagogy in second and foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly, 25,* 459-480.
[5]   Dörnyei, Z. (2007). Research methods in applied linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[6]   Ellis, R. (2002). The place of grammar instruction in the second/foreign language curriculum. In S. Fotos and E. Hinkel (Eds.), *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms* (pp. 17-34). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[7]   Ellis, R. (2003). Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[8]   Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: an SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly, 40*, 83-107.
[9]   Fotos, S. (1994). Integrating grammar instruction and communicative language use through grammar consciousness-raising tasks. *TESOL Quarterly, 28*, 323-351.
[10] Fotos, S. (2005). Traditional and grammar translation methods for second language teaching. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 653-670). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[11] Harmer, J. (2007). The practice of English language teaching. (Fourth edition). Harlow: Longman.
[12] Lynch, T. (2001). Seeing what they meant: transcribing as a route to noticing. *ELT Journal, 55,* 124-132.
[13] Mackey, A., and Gass, S. M. (2005). Second language research: methodology and design. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[14] Sasson, D. (2007). Methods for teaching grammar: Demythisizing the role of grammar in today's ESL/EFL classrooms. From http://www.suite101.com/content/methods-for-teaching-grammar-a12704.
[15] Sheen, R. (2003). Focus on form-a myth in the making? *ELT Journal, 57,* 225-233.
[16] Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 11*, 128-158.
[17] Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (Second edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
[18] Tsui, A. B. M. (2003). Understanding expertise in teaching: Case studies of ESL teachers. New York: Cambridge University Press.
[19] van Lier, L. (1988*).* The classroom and the language learner: Ethnography and second language classroom Research. Harlow: Longman.

Sasan Baleghizadeh is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at Shahid Beheshti University, G.C. of Iran, where he teaches applied linguistics, syllabus design, and materials development. He is the author of a number of simplified readers such as *Tales from Rumi* and *Tales from Men of Wisdom* all published by the Iran Language Institute. His recent publications have appeared in *TESL Reporter*, *ELT Journal*, and *The Teacher Trainer*.

Mohammad Amin Mozaheb holds an MA degree in TEFL from Khatam University in Tehran, Iran. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is his favorite area of research.