How to Teach Grammar to Adult ESP Learners at Technical University More Communicatively: Task-Based Approach

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Abstract

The article is devoted to comparison of the effectiveness of grammar acquisition by adult learners in two types of instruction – based on the traditional PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach and TBL (Task-Based Learning) approach – in ESP university classes. We conducted a qualitative research in which we tried to incorporate grammar instruction in communicative language teaching and for that purpose selected two groups of students (the PPP group and the TBL group). They were taught five topics, each with a focus on particular grammar items. The comparison of the results we obtained showed that students' achievement in the TBL group increased more substantially than in the PPP group. Also, the majority of students in the TBL group liked learning grammar at the point of need, which we consider particularly important, since it stimulated their motivation and contributed to the acquisition of grammatical structures. When considering the positive aspects of our experience of using TBL and task-based grammar learning in particular, we should first of all point out its learner-centeredness which provides a number of advantages in teaching adult students: the focus on real communication, addressing the students' needs by putting them into authentic communicative situations, encouragement of students' responsibility for their own learning, exposure of students to a wide variety of language, including grammar, ability to motivate students.

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1. Introduction

The on-going changes in business environment and quickly growing demands in professional communication set new challenges before ESP learners and teachers, because at present English is a global lingua-franca and predominant language in business worldwide. Since a high level of linguistic competence, which is now as important as excellent professional competence of employees, is difficult to achieve without knowledge of grammar, many scientist and practitioners debate on how grammar is best acquired and taught. The issue is even more polemic when adult learners are concerned.

As lifelong learning is now a global trend and more and more people study to acquire new qualifications, the mean age of university students is constantly growing. In view of this it is particularly important to understand what makes adults different from children as learners, what learning needs they have, what learning techniques are appropriate for meeting their needs.

In our article we **aim** to compare the effectiveness of grammar acquisition by adult learners in two types of instruction – based on the traditional PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach and TBL (Task-Based Learning) approach – in ESP university classes. We consider this study particularly important for a technical university like ours because a considerable number of students who enter it have quite a low level of English language proficiency and the least developed skill is grammar.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Adult learner and his/her active role in ESP instruction

Since the professional education of future specialists at university level is shaped by the specific characteristics of adults as learners, it is important to define the term "adulthood" which is essential for the understanding of specifics and needs of an adult learner. One of the earliest and most comprehensive definitions of adulthood belongs to Knowles (1980) who viewed it from four

perspectives – physiological ("achievement of the ability to reproduce" (p. 24)), legal (the age that gives the right to vote, drive a vehicle, drink alcohol beverages, etc.), social (performance of "social roles typically assigned by our culture to those it considers to be adults – the role of worker, spouse, parent, responsible citizen, soldier, and the like" (p. 24)) and psychological (taking responsibility for their own life (p. 24)). It is notable that in adult education he suggested using the last two definitions, because the most distinguishing features of a mature individual are the ability to perform adult roles and self-concept.

In the theory of education numerous researches have been dedicated to the study of specifics of an adult learner. As stated by Merriam and Caffarella (1999), "it is … the nature of adults as learners and the distinguishing characteristics of the adult learning process that differentiate adult education from other kinds of education. To facilitate the process of learning, it is especially important to know who the adult learner is…" (p. xi). Six characteristics of adults as learners were formulated by Knowles (1990) as andragogical principles of learning and are "inarguably the best known set of principles explaining learning in adulthood" (Merriam, 1993, p. 1):

1. Adults need to know why learning something is necessary for them and what benefits they will have from it (Knowles, 1990, p. 57-58);

2. Adults have a self-concept of being independent individuals responsible for their own lives and capable of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1990, p. 58);

3. Adults have big and varied life and professional experience which is a rich source for learning. Hence Knowles (1990) makes an emphasis on experiential techniques, group work and peer-helping activities (p. 59);

4. "Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations" (p. 60);

5. "In contrast to children's … subject-centered orientation to learning…, adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning" (p. 61);

6. Adults' motivation for learning is mainly caused by internal factors (the desire to increase the satisfaction from the job, raise the self-esteem, quality of life, etc.) (p. 63).

Knowles (1990) also shows how the adult learning process can be organized based on these principles and how interactive teaching methods and group work can be used to engage learners and motivate them to be active participants of educational activities (Lytovchenko, 2016).

As a discipline which is learnt by adult learners, ESP is based on the principles of adult learning developed by Knowles (1990). This implies that learning should be meaningful to students. Their knowledge and experience should be actively used in the process of instruction. In classroom, materials and tools should be used which students may really use in their professional activity. English language skills should be developed simultaneously with content learning (Global Talent Bridge, 2018, p. 3-3). Studies show that integrated learning improves interdisciplinary connections, intensifies motivation to study a foreign language, develops cognitive and practical skills as well as increases students' professional competence (Kuzminska et al., 2019).

Considering that the learner, his/her needs, aims and motives are at the center of the learning process, he/she is not just a passive recipient of information, but an active participant of learning whose interaction and collaboration with the teacher and other learners are the major motivating force of the learning process. The realization of such interaction and collaboration is best provided by the use of interactive learning methods which most fully involve the learners into the learning process.

2.2. TBL and teaching grammar in ESP

One of communicative methods which most organically fit into ESP learning is TBL or TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching). It is "an approach based on use of "tasks" as the core unit of planning, instruction, research and assessment in language teaching" (Knapp and Seidlhofer, 2009, p. 352). Nunan (2004) defines a task as "a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning" (p. 4). Ellis (Ellis, 2009) identifies the following key criteria of a task:

1. The primary focus must be on "meaning".

2. There must be a kind of "gap".

3. Learners have to rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources.

4. There is a clear outcome other than the use of language (p. 223).

The key criterion from Ellis's (2014) point of view is No 3 since it most vividly makes a distinction between a task and an exercise. When doing an "exercise", students have to manipulate with a text, e.g. fill in gaps, perform a scripted dialogue, substitute words in sentences. When performing a task students have to create a text in order to achieve the outcome of the task. We can add that tasks are always focused on solving problems which "come in many forms, such as naturally occurring events" (La Shun L. Carroll, 2017, p. 81) and thus brings in more authenticity to learning.

In the context of our research it should be noted that some scientists (e.g. Sheen, 2003; Swan, 2005) believe that in TBLT there is no room for grammar instruction, since they find that in this approach grammar is taught mainly in the form of brief corrective feedback. However, other researchers (e.g. Long, 2015; Ellis 2015a; Nunan, 2004; Esfandiari, 2018) emphasize the importance of incorporating grammar instruction in communicative language teaching, especially TBLT.

We totally agree with their view and think that, as a method which most fully meets the needs of adult learners, TBLT can be used not only for teaching listening, reading, speaking and writing skills, but also for grammar instruction. The work on a task creates a communicative context which is necessary for making a focus on grammatical form. While working primarily on content in performing a task, students may also focus their attention on grammar, which will help them solve the problem.

Long (1992), particularly, claims that focus on form in TBLT should arise in the process of interaction and be reactive (made when there is need to solve a communication problem) and brief. However, he does not think that focus on form in TBLT should always be implicit and admits that teaching grammar rules explicitly may also be appropriate if needed in particular communicative situations. Furthermore Long (2015) points out that learning grammar in TBLT needs not be always

incidental. On the contrary, he finds intentional learning useful as well for better language acquisition by students.

Ellis (2016) does not agree with Long (1992) in that the focus on form should occur only as response to a problem. He finds it too narrow and notes that there are occasions in communicative ESL classes when the teacher pre-empts a problem, for example, he/she may hint students that they can use a particular grammatical form when performing the task. Or sometimes the learners pre-empt as when they begin to ask questions about linguistic forms. In these cases, focus on form helps to avoid rather than fix a linguistic problem, but it is still clearly problem oriented. He argues that "interactive focus on form, then, can be defined as the pre-emptive or responsive attention to form that occurs during an activity that is primarily meaning focused and that addresses either a communicative or linguistic problem" (Ellis, 2016, p. 410).

It is notable that emphasizing the importance of incorporating focus on form in communicative language teaching Ellis (2015b) does not agree with the view that the teacher should not interfere while students are working on a communicative task. He argues that correcting students' errors during their communication is highly efficient for drawing students' attention to form. Furthermore Ellis (2016) considers explicit corrective feedback more effective, since it is more likely to guarantee a switch of attention to a particular form. In general he views communicative and traditional grammar teaching as complementary rather than opposed approaches to teaching and points out that it is possible to combine them by including planned form-focused lessons into TBL with the aim to address particular linguistic features which are problematic to learners. He also makes an emphasis on the efficiency of task-repetition and argues that when students are asked to repeat the same task, they are better prepared to conceptualize on the content and choose the language necessary to convey it. Thus, focus on linguistic form is closer when students perform the task for the second time (Ellis 2016). Summarizing a number of studies Ellis (2015b) concludes that "learners who have received form-focused instruction learn more rapidly and generally advance further along the interlanguage continuum than naturalistic learners" (p. 22).

3. Methods

To compare the effectiveness of grammar acquisition by adult learners in the traditional PPP and communicative TBL approaches while learning ESP at technical university we conducted a qualitative research, since our aim was not collecting statistical data, but rather making an attempt to share the experience of incorporating grammar instruction in communicative language teaching.

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 32 first year Bachelor degree students of Institute of Mechanical Engineering of National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" (Kyiv, Ukraine). They studied ESP and had predominantly B1 English proficiency level on CEFR scale. The students were divided into two groups – the PPP group (16 persons) and the TBL group (16 persons).

3.2. Materials and procedure

Five topics were studied by both groups, each with a focus on particular grammar items: Robotics (Present Simple (Active and Passive)), Innovations in Technology (Relative clauses), Environmental Engineering (Past Simple), Properties of Plastics (Modal verbs), Renewable Energy (Passive + to; Modals + passive). The same learning materials were used in both groups.

The PPP group received traditional grammar instruction consisting of explanation of the rules (presentation), controlled oral and written production exercises (practice) and an essay about the sources of energy which are most commonly used in their country, the purposes they are used for, the sources of energy that have good prospects for being used in the future (free production). The focus on grammatical form was explicit.

In the TBL group, students' attention was drawn to grammatical form while they were performing the task and thus primarily focused on meaning. The instruction in this group was learner-centered. The students worked in groups and performed the tasks which were close to those

they may have to perform in real life. The teacher focused the students' attention on grammatical structures, explained their meaning and use during the performance of the task (at the stage of analysis), which allowed the students to improve their works and use the target language where appropriate.

We present two plans of the task-based grammar lessons conducted in the TBL group which were designed using creative ideas suggested in the MOOC course "Teaching Grammar Communicatively" (World Learning, 2019).

Lesson 1. Topic: Robotics

Target grammar: Present Simple (Active and Passive)

Stage	Procedure	Interaction
Introduction to topic	Teacher asks students: What are robots? Where are they used at present?	T-S
	Then he/she shows pictures of robots and asks students to work in groups and decide what the robots displayed in them could be used for. Students compare their answers with others in their group and provide reasons to support their answers.	S-S
Task	Students listen to a recording about different applications of robots and, in groups, discuss the benefits and dangers of using robots in various spheres of people's lives.	S-S
Planning	Students work in small groups and have to describe three most important or extraordinary uses of robots they know about. Then, each group prepares a three-minute TED talk about these applications. Teacher acts as facilitator and helps students to correct their presentations.	S-S
Report	Groups give their talks and record themselves on smart phones. Students comment on the presentations, ask questions, decide which of the robot uses are most important/ extraordinary and explain why. Teacher provides feedback on content and form.	S-S
Analysis	Language focus: Present Simple (Active and Passive). Teacher asks students to look at the script of the recording they listened to at the beginning of the lesson and find sentences with the Present Simple (Active and Passive) used to describe applications of robots.	T-S S-T

	Then, teacher writes them on the board, elicits from the students what the Present Simple means and when it is used and gives explanations.	T-S
Practice	In the same groups, the students go over their TED talks, underline the *Present Simple (Active and Passive)* and correct mistakes if needed. Then, they report to the rest of the class what changes they have made in their TED talks.	S-S
Evaluation and reflection	Teacher makes notes of what students say and gives feedback at the end of the lesson.	T-S
	On a piece of paper students write down one thing they liked and one thing they did not like about the lesson.	S

Lesson 2. Topic: Renewable Energy

Target grammar: Expressing purpose, ability

Stage	Procedure	Interaction
Introduction to topic	Teacher asks students what they know about the energy crisis on our planet and to brainstorm the problems caused by the use of fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – for energy production. Then, the teacher shows pictures and asks students to identify the sources of renewable energy on them.	T-S
	Students work in groups and discuss how each source can be used to replace fossil fuels.	S-S
Task	Students work in pairs. Teacher distributes a text about different sources of energy and asks students to read it. Students study the text and, in pairs, discuss the advantages and problems of each, also adding their own ideas.	S-S
Planning	Students work in small groups and have to decide: • what sources of energy are most commonly used in their country; what purposes they are used for; • what sources of energy have good prospects for being used in their country in the future and why. Then, each group prepares a poster illustrating their ideas. Teacher acts as facilitator, helps students to correct their reports.	S-S
Report	All posters are displayed on a wall. Representatives of each group read the information on the posters to the rest of the class. Students find similarities and differences. Teacher provides feedback on content and form.	S-S
Analysis	Language focus: expressing purpose; ability.	
	Teacher asks students to look at the posters and the text they read at the beginning of the lesson and find grammatical structures which are used to express purpose; ability.	T-S S-T

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	Teacher focuses students' attention on these structures and explains their meaning and use: Purpose: Passive + to: *The wind is used to turn the blades of a wind mill.* Ability: Modals + passive: *Solar energy can be stored during day-time and used at night.*	T-S
Practice	In the same groups students revise their posters including ideas suggested by other groups (up to three ideas) and using the target language (*Passive + to; Modals + passive*). Then, they report to the rest of the class what changes they have made in their posters.	S-S
Evaluation and reflection	Teacher makes notes of what students say and gives feedback at the end of the lesson.	T-S
	On small pieces of paper students write down what they learnt in the lesson and what they want to improve.	S

To compare the results of the study in two groups the students in each of them were asked to do the same test before the first lesson (a pre-test) and after the study of five topics (a post-test). The test was focused on the target grammar of these topics: Present Simple (Active and Passive), Relative clauses, Past Simple, Modal verbs, Passive + to; Modals + passive. It consisted of multiple choice and fill in the gaps tasks and was assessed using the following grading scale: A – 100-95; B – 94-85; C – 84-75; D – 74-65; E – 64-60; scores less than 60 were considered as failing scores.

In the TBL group we also used an open-ended questionnaire to find out the students' attitudes to task-based grammar instruction which included three questions:

1. Did you like learning grammar at the point of need? Why / Why not?

2. Did you feel it would be appropriate to do additional grammar exercises at the end of each lesson? If yes, what particular grammar items needed further practice?

3. Did you have any difficulties learning grammar at the point of need? If yes, what kind of difficulties?

4. Obtained results

The results of the pre-test which was conducted before the study did not reveal any significant differences between the groups. After the study, as shown by the post-test, positive dynamics was observed in both groups. However the number of students with high grades – A, B and C – in the TBL group increased more substantially than in the PPP group (by 12.5 % vs 6.25 %; 6.25 % vs 0 % and 18.75 % vs 6.25 %, respectively). Also the number of students with low grades – D and E – decreased more substantially in the TBL than in the PPP group (by 18.75 % vs 6.25 % and 12.5 % vs 6.25 %, respectively). The results of both tests are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Results of the pre-test and post-test in PPP group

| Grades | PPP group | | | | |
| | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Difference |
	Students	%	*Students*	%	%
A	2	12.50	3	18.75	+6.25
B	3	18.75	3	18.75	0.00
C	5	31.25	6	37.50	+6.25
D	4	25.00	3	18.75	-6.25
E	2	12.50	1	6.25	-6.25
Total	16	100	16	100	

Table 2. Results of the pre-test and post-test in TBL group

| Grades | TBL group | | | | |
| | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Difference |
	Students	%	*Students*	%	%
A	3	18.75	5	31.25	+12.50
B	2	12.50	3	18.75	+6.25
C	4	25.00	7	43.75	+18.75
D	4	25.00	1	6.25	-18.75
E	3	18.75	1	6.25	-12.50
Total	16	100	16	100	

The analysis of the students' answers to the questionnaire in the TBL group showed that almost all of them (15 students (93.75 %)) liked learning grammar at the point of need. The most common reasons were that:

- they understood how to use these grammar structures to perform the task;

- they had clear examples of the use of these structures in the text;

- they did not have to learn rules;

- they could remember these structures because they used them to perform the task;

- they did not have to do grammar exercises;

- in the group they could get help from peers.

Only one student preferred working with a grammar book, because, as he wrote, he wanted to have "a whole picture" of each grammar topic.

In answer to the question about the appropriateness of doing additional grammar exercises at the end of the lessons six students (37.50 %) answered that it would be appropriate, because grammar exercises:

- give them more practice in the use of the grammar structures;

- help them better understand the grammar structures;

- help them use the structures more confidently;

- help them prepare for tests.

Four of these students (25 %) thought that grammar exercises were appropriate when studying all grammar items, one student (6.25 %) felt they were needed when studying Relative clauses and Modal verbs, one student (6.25 %) found Modal verbs more difficult than other topics and wanted to do additional grammar exercises to learn them better.

When answering the question about the difficulties in learning grammar at the point of need, one student wrote that he needed more time for learning grammar in class. One student had problems with the use of Modal verbs and needed more practice. One student said he sometimes was not sure if he used the grammatical structures correctly, but since he worked in a group, he asked his peers and they helped him.

5. Discussion

The results of our study give ground to believe that, being an innovative method which helps to make language learning more communicative, TBL provides many possibilities for teaching grammar to adult ESP learners at technical university. We conducted a qualitative research in which we tried to incorporate grammar instruction in communicative language teaching and for that purpose selected two groups of students (the PPP group and the TBL group) and taught them five topics, each with a focus on particular grammar items. The comparison of the results we obtained showed that students' achievement in the TBL group, as demonstrated by the post-test, increased more substantially than in the PPP group.

Also the majority of students in the TBL group, as can be seen from their answers to the questionnaire, liked learning grammar at the point of need, which we consider particularly important, since it stimulated their motivation and contributed to the acquisition of grammatical structures. Another important result of our study showed that more than a third of the students in the TBL group thought it would be appropriate to do grammar exercises in addition to teaching grammar at the point of need as it would give them more practice in the use of grammar structures, help better understand and more confidently use them. We should also point out that as a whole the students did not find it difficult to learn grammar at the point of need while working on a task.

All this gives us ground to believe that the results of our study are in line with those obtained in a whole number of other researches (Ellis, 2018; Long 2015; Esfandiari, 2018; Herrin, 2009; Viriya, 2018; I-Chen Chen, 2018; Lytovchenko, 2009; Prabhu, 1999; Recatalá, 2016) which suggest that TBL with its focus on problem-solving has evident advantages for both adult and child language learners and is particularly appropriate for teaching grammar. In our opinion, one of the most important advantages of TBL is that it creates the context for learning a language form and thus, as stated by Nunan (1998), shows learners "how to use grammar to get things done, socialize, obtain goods and services, and express their personality through language" (p. 103).

It should be noted that in our study, the instruction of grammar was both reactive and preemptive. The reactive teaching took place in the form of corrective feedback, mainly recasts, on content and form at the report stage. We found it effective, since it helped the students to improve their performance and acquisition of the grammatical forms. Hence we totally agree with studies

(e.g. Li, 2010; Ellis, 2016; Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013; Sheen, 2004) which confirmed the positive impact of corrective feedback on language learning. When teaching one of the topics ("Environmental Engineering") feedback was provided by the students and not the teacher. We used peer assessment because it fosters students' cognitive abilities, enhances their responsibility for the learning outcomes and thus promotes better language learning (Lavrysh, 2016).

Preempting grammar problems took place at the stage of analysis, when the teacher drew the students' attention to grammatical forms, elicited from students the meaning and use of these forms, gave explanations. In our opinion, both reactive and preemptive focuses on grammatical form should be used as complementing each other. As stated by Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001), "reactive focus on form addresses a performance problem (which may or may not reflect a competence problem) whereas preemptive focus on form addresses an actual or a perceived gap in the students' knowledge" (p. 414).

In our opinion, it is important that the preemptive focus on form should be explicit and followed by the repetition of the task. In our study the task was repeated at the Practice stage, which provided students with the possibility to correct their mistakes, improve their work and draw the whole classes' attention to the changes they had made. Thus the results of our research are in agreement with those of Bygate (2001) and Sheppard (2006) who believe that there should be an input between the first and second performances of the task to prompt the enhanced focus on form. We also agree with Ellis (2016) in that the post-task activities can also be of the focus on form kind, e.g. grammar exercises. In our study the students were not asked to do additional grammar exercises, but more then 1/3 of them, as shown by the survey, thought they would be useful for practicing grammatical structures more thoroughly.

When considering the positive aspects of our experience of using TBL and task-based grammar learning in particular, we should first of all point out its learner-centeredness which, as stated by Lytovchenko et al. (2018), provides a number of advantages in teaching adult students: the focus on real communication, addressing the students' needs by putting them into authentic communicative situations, encouragement of students' responsibility for their own learning, exposure of students to a wide variety of language, including grammar, ability to motivate students. It is particularly important that learning grammar is integrated into learning other skills, since

"when students apply a variety of skills and perspectives, they admit the sense and value of what they are studying" (Lavrysh, & Lytovchenko, 2019, p, 741). The integrated approach to learning allows acquiring "new knowledge and also new skills that serve the students to face the events of life in a successful way, … so that they can handle the new situations that are presented to them and develop their maximum potential as people" (Gómez-Ejerique, & López-Cantos, 2019, p. 48).

Our research was limited to learning of only five topics but, based on our experience, we believe that TBL is a universal approach and there are no restrictions for its use in the learning of any topic and any grammatical structure in ESP.

6. Conclusions

The comparison of the effectiveness of grammar instruction of adult learners in the traditional PPP and the communicative TBL approach in ESP university classes showed that the latter approach provides better learning and is more motivating for adult students. The primary feature of TBL which promotes its efficiency is the creation of the context for learning a grammar form which shows learners how to use it for different purposes in the real-world situations. The combination of both reactive and preemptive grammar instruction provides more comprehensive learning as it addresses both the performance problems and the gap in students' knowledge. The addition of the stages of explicit grammar teaching and the task repetition to the format of the task prompts the enhanced focus on a grammatical form.

The prospects for further research may include the study of the kinds and specifics of tasks in TBL.

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