

Exploring the Practice of Using Prefabricated Tasks-Based Instructions to Enhance EFL Learners' productive language Competences: *Top-Down Approach*

Welehawerya Gebrekrstos (PhD Candidate in TEFL) nelawiwe@gmail.com

Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

Abstract

It is obvious that teaching grammar has a prolonged history in the EFL circle, and different approaches had been applied on. In Ethiopian tradition however, it is envisaged as the simplest task like breathing oxygen comparing to other language skills. This study thus tried to look-for the nature and practice of prefabricated task-oriented instruction in teaching grammar for secondary school EFL learners in Bahir Dar. A cross-sectional case study on two sections of secondary school learners along with their English teachers was employed to address the issue under study. Classroom observation and in-depth interview with teachers were the pertinent data gathering instruments. Moreover, different phases were employed in the observation sessions so far so that it enabled collect and triangulate the data.

Eventually, the data were analyzed qualitatively by transcribed, coded, and categorized thematically, and draw conclusions accordingly. The categorized themes hence are the practice of tasks preparation/selection, tasks presentation, and tasks integration. The results indicated that prefabricated tasks-oriented instruction could enhance L2 learners' grammar competence. Ultimately, teachers' interview reveal that teacher's ability to make a diagnosis learners' L2 level, their relation with the situation, and design material and tasks that fit and enable learners to develop grammatical competence are rudimentary musts. Though prefabricated tasks-based instruction and grammar teaching are inseparable entities in the teaching habit of foreign language, could it be authentic or standard, tasks should be modified in a way neither too complex nor too cramped is vital. Such practice enables to offer inputs which are comprehended for learners in a way they can manipulate. Prefabricated tasks therefore could offer remedies the ramifications emanated from relying on a ridged language teaching materials, or an unintentional approach.

Keywords: Prefabricated tasks, productive language, integrated teaching, and top-down approach

1. Background

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It is obvious that teaching grammar has a prolonged history in the EFL circle, and different approaches had been applied on, and had been swung over paradigms. Tonkyn (1994) and Swann (2012), conceptually divide the history of grammar teaching in the foreign/second language into three phases: namely the original supremacy of grammar, the decline of grammar, and the rediscovery of grammar.

Despite the various emphases had been given for grammar at different periods, skipping it could not make the program complete, for it is part and parcel of language teaching enterprise (Swick, 2005). The reason why is, the primary concern of teaching L2 involves making learners to use the language with its central concern on developing both the structure and the functional usage of the language. The long lasted argument however is which part of language should get more emphasis, and which teaching method is more appropriate to attain the goal of teaching a certain language entity. Moreover, though many scholars on teaching foreign language had been stepped ups and downs, it was to meet their own line of thoughts and philosophical perspectives (Richards, 2011) than bringing suitable move toward. What Richards claim is that scholars did not spaced innovative method than innovative-likes. As a result of intensive debates, the two extreme poles, deductive and inductive approaches vividly came in to exist being the leading approaches for foreign language teaching circle.

Traditionally, teaching and learning of grammatical elements in the EFL was at the centre of language instruction (Richards, 2006) & (Ellis, 2002). In such practices, most learners spend time and effort merely acquiring the language structures and patterns. Moreover, the paradigm as a whole was highly expected learners to acquire grammar components, but the functional counterpart remained deemphasized for long (Cohen, 1996). This habit was mainly manifested in Ethiopian EFL enterprise. In this tradition, students are expected to pay most of their attention developing language accuracy in exams at the expense of the genuine communicative value of language learning (Swann, 2012). With such practice, students might have mastery over the structures of the language, but unable to express their intention and emotion appropriately as they desire to.

Consequently, most students faced problems of communication in real life interaction which is the sociolinguistic aspect of the language to be taught (Ellis, 2002). In short, learning grammar alone is neither necessary nor sufficient in the dynamic environment we are living in.

Alternatively, indirect teaching of foreign language structure was invented to resolve problems emanated from mere grammar emphasis in language learning practice around the 1970s (Richards, 2011). In this paradigm, teaching the functional usage of language has got priority concern putting aside the structural elements in turn. In the recent educational movement however, teaching grammar become recuperating being a rudimentary part of target language teaching. To do so some ideal approaches were surfaced on the EFL circles (Cuesta Cuesta, 1995). Using these new approaches, learners are expected formulating the grammar components of a language inductively from what learners exposed to and experienced from. This is supported by Vygotsky's social constructivism learning theory, and Krashen's comprehensible input Hypothesis also confirmed it to some extents. As a result, the student's passion for explicit formulization of generalizations and internalization can be met better by providing appropriate situations and then grammatical explanations.

Once this basis is provided, then the learner could minimize difficulties in dealing with the actual use of language. At the same time, learners can formulate the appropriate grammatical structures from the bounded situations they are engaged in. Evidences show that communicative use in real life sticks the learner's mind, insight into pattern. This is what Ur (1999) and Krashen (1983) described as the dual process of acquisition/learning of language development. This approach came in to exist two-folded: as wide context of the materials having no predetermined boundary and situation-bound materials which predesigned for the specific level of learners and contexts. The wide context is a corpus that can be of value in leading learners to new insights into the way in which language is used. The argument is, if the corpus is large enough, then we can be fairly confident that what we observe is representative of general usage (Hewings and Hewings, 2005). However, scholars criticized this approach for its impractical, especially in contexts where learners get less opportunity of wider contexts. Settings like Ethiopian, EFL classrooms are depending on limited inputs. Chowdhury (2014) tried to analog this as:

“A little boy can switch on the TV and with the remote control in his hand; he can keep on changing channels until the desired one comes. In doing so, his primary goal of watching TV is served. But, if the TV is a little bit out of order, the boy cannot fix it up. On the contrary, the TV mechanics or able adult can both watch TV and fix things up accordingly.

Of course, in the given situation the mechanics have more control than the boy and hence in a relatively advantageous situation to command things at their will.”

Chowdhury, 2014

Situation-bound and prefabricated tasks on the other hand are considered as the rightmost foreign language grammar teaching because learners use situations highly predetermined by the teachers and fit with their schema. It is for the reason, prefabricated situations and tasks are functional units whose meaning can be explained only as functions of specific contexts. At the same time, learners can become familiar with the routines of linguistic expressions used for certain purpose. This is frequently explained in Krashen's "I + 1 Input Hypothesis", and Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" which basically describes the cognitive development of students' in the social interaction, but with purposely designed inputs for interaction. It is generally this situational safekeeping that distinguishes prefabricated situations/tasks from their freely generated counterparts.

Moreover, Krashen (1981) stated that patterns could evolve learners directly into creative language that can be ingredients of the creative process. This implies that propositions of situational language enable to catch up with automatic language production.

A particular type of situation-bound tasks for grammar instruction is prefabricated task-based instruction, also known as a genre-based instruction. Task here is used in a special sense to refer to structured sequences of language that are used in specific contexts in specific ways (Richards, 2006).

Hence, teachers need to use tasks that are designed especially with a pedagogical purpose in mind because they contain many examples of a particular feature of language (Tingting, 2011; Feez & Joyce, 1998). Applying this instructional approach, starts by identifying the kinds of uses of language the learner is expected to be able to master at the end of the instruction is by far vital. Teaching strategies are then selected to help achieve these goals. According to this view, learners in different contexts have to master the use of the tasks types occurring most frequently in specific contexts. Moreover, how the relevant contextual aspects of the local situational context which include the time, the location, the age and gender of participants and their relative status is considered (Richards, 2011).

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Making the current study on the use of prefabricated situation and tasks in teaching grammar, the finding could have both practical and theoretical contribution for practitioners in EFL circle. The practical significances of the study are projected to English teacher. They can be benefited from, on how to select and design situations for teaching grammar. Moreover, students would be able to aware of how they learn grammar using prefabricated tasks at ease; and lastly, it will click material designers how to prepare materials to maximize learners' opportunity to learn. Theoretically on the other hand, it is believed serve for interested researchers as bedrock for extended study.

Hence, this study requires investigating to what extent EFL teachers use prefabricated tasks-based instruction in teaching grammar, and how they apply it their classrooms. To this end, the following research questions are answered employing appropriate instruments.

2. Research questions

The study intends to answer the following research questions.

1. Could prefabricated tasks-based instructions promote secondary school EFL learners' grammar competences?
2. What situation do EFL teachers employ to make grammar teaching ease and learning possible using prefabricated tasks -based instructions?
3. How teachers organize and deliver prefabricated tasks while teaching grammar items?

3. Methodology

This study was aimed to investigate the practice and realization of prefabricated tasks based instruction in fostering secondary school students' grammar competence. A cross-sectional research method was employed to figure out the practice of the phenomena under study using appropriate data gathering instruments. The study was conducted on one of the governmental secondary schools in Amhara Regional state, Bahir Dar City Administration. For it is much expensive to include and gather data from the whole population in the school; two sections from grade nine were selected using judgmental sampling.

Classroom observation and in-depth interview what some scholars term-participatory observation were the data gathering instruments to collect the relevant data. Different procedures were conducted in different phases of the observation session. Some of the levelheaded steps and techniques are making pre-observation session before the actual classroom observation was took place, and it consists of certain steps like asking consent from the school principal, building rapport with subject teachers, and arranging schedule with the teachers to be observed were the major tasks.

Building up rapport with the sampled teachers, and arranging schedules ahead of time, enabled me to enter the classrooms at ease. Two sections who taught by different English teachers were observed seating at the back chair so as to capture the holistic practices of the teaching-learning process. A certain analysis is made on the pre-observation sessions which are vital for the issue under study. From the two teachers I proposed to observe, one was volunteer and humble to be observed, while the other tried to reluctant and the reason was that no new thing can gain.

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Description of Classroom observation and its analysis for T1 first lesson: At the very conception, the teacher had entered to the class and ordered students to open their text book on a certain page (194) which entitled “Animals”. The teacher commenced dictating about animals’ classification, their important and disadvantageous they give for human being generally. Meanwhile, he raised some questions and gave chances to the students turn by turn to share their experiences of what animals do they know, whether they like those animals or not, what each animals looks like and so on. ..., students were spoken out the facts when they saw animal in the near past.

The teacher again raised question what students did when they saw the animal. Students tried to share what they were do when saw the animals in the near past. After most students reflect and share their experiences, he tried to write some students’ sentences on the board which were constructed of paired clauses, and made students to discuss on the types of sentence displayed on the board. What relation do these sentences have, and what types of tense did each sentence stand for. Students were required to identify and underlines the type for each sentence. Some of the examples constructed by students are:

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1. I saw a donkey when I was visiting my grandparents.
2. When we were enjoyed in the off shore of Tana, I saw a crocodile.

The teacher finally summarized that tense is the relationship between actions and the time they happened, and concluded that the types of tenses used in the sentences above are simple past and simple past progressive. At the end, the teacher ended the class directing students to write five sentences using both simple past and past continuous tenses.

To analyze the obtained data from the classroom observation, here is brief description of analysis. The lesson was delivered smoothly from the conception to the conclusion. Most students were active because the issue under study was familiar with students' daily life. Accordingly, they were interacted warmly in constructing their own sentences, and in giving feedbacks on other students'. From my observation, students were not aware of that they were learning grammar, but they were practicing them in a well manner. This strategy is supported by Richards (2011) and he states, "If a teacher prepare task and make students to do the activities, the students would feel that the teacher is not really teaching them". In relation to EFL teaching approach, the teacher tried to use the Sysoyev's (1999) 'EEE' model. He taught grammar lesson integrating with specific pre-constructed situation and tasks, which familiar with students' daily experience, culture, and with other language skills so that learners can enhance grammar unconsciously and use it for permanent exercise.

Description of Classroom observation for T1 second lesson and its analysis:

While teaching the rules when could and could not gerunds followed by the preposition "to".

The teacher wrote a sample conversation on the board played by classmates when departing from gym.

Abebe: Where would you go soon you leave the gym?

Bekele: I am *going to school* and study for tomorrow's exam.

Abebe: what about you Jemila?

Jemila: I am *going home* because my mom is waiting me.

Bethel: but, I am *going upstairs* to take shower.

Abebe: Senait?

Senait: I am *going abroad* to visit my relatives.

The teacher then asked the students what structural differences they observe from the conversation, play the same conversation with their mates.

Instead of boring students by do and not do grammars, deliver them with other spices is found effective way of instruction. Students were observed brightly observe the lesson, and seem grasped the learning entities at ease. This was for the teacher selected tasks and presented them in lively and integrated manners.

Description of Classroom observation for T2's first lesson and its analysis: The teacher started by ordering students to sit according their one-to-five formations (arrangement), and directed them to open their textbook on a certain page (194) which talks about "Animals". ..., after a nasty discussion, each group was ordered to present based on the textbook's model and the rest group could gave feedback on each presentation. Finally, the teacher concluded the daily lesson ordering students to read the short story and feel with appropriate verb on the space provided.

From the real observation, though the teacher tried to invest lot energy and time to deliver the lessons, students were seemed dissatisfied with the strategy she used. At large, the language teaching objectives did not meet. The reasons could be because she wondered here and there with fragmented language elements than integrating them. The language components were not crossed one another to simplify and modify to develop other skill. The major concern of the teacher was mere keeping time and paced the lesson accordingly the time plan. For example, several times, the teacher ordered students saying "keep quite you are wasting your time." This implies, instead of helping them by offering inputs appropriate for teaching the language elements to be learnt. Generally, what the lesson intended to address was not compatible with what she actually practiced.

Description of Classroom observation for T2's second lesson and its analysis:

The lesson was similar to the T1, which was on the relationship of "gerund" and the preposition "to". The teacher simply listed gerunds followed by "to" and these are not in two rows. And then students are required to study intensively over the lists.

Few students were observed copied down, but most were simply rumored on. Of the major drawback for is teacher's limitation in tasks preparation/selection and present them in harmony with the lively experience students are living in.

3.2. Post-observation session (In-depth interview)

Winding up each teacher's classroom observation for two grammar lessons each, a close discussion for a minimum of one hour with each teacher was made. This discussion was commenced by appraising each teacher's courageous to teach the lessons. Gradually, I forwarded questions which formulated from the classroom scenarios, and crossing their interview responses. The teachers were exposed to narrate the strategies they used to teach the specific grammar elements and the way they treat grammar in context in their teaching experiences. The responses for each teacher were similar for ideal questions, but vary in most of their practice on the ground.

I emphasized recording notes on those related to the study's purpose though some preliminary questions were used to know the general impression and serve as a laden to the targeted questions. Hence, the teachers' responses for the questions are analyzed and presented below.

Regarding the prefabricated tasks-based instruction, each teacher reflected on different positions. *T1* believes on the appropriateness of prefabricated tasks-based instruction because it enables learners to learn structures and internalize them easily. In relation to this, Richards, (2011) and Ur (1999) added as, if the instruction is guided and promote meaningful practice, learners can produce their own output according to a set pattern; but exactly what vocabulary they use is up to them. *T1's* words are "understand the language elements, and create the appropriate situations and tasks is by far minimize difficulties of learners' acquisition; otherwise, they may feel boredom if we start and end with the same manner".

T2 on the contrary, is in a position that though prefabricated tasks-based instruction is important to enhance foreign language grammar competence; it is difficult to exercise in a harmony way in the large class size and short time to cover the huge textbook. In addition, it exposed students to disturb the class when they practice the tasks regularly. "It is paper value in Ethiopia unless the class size is reduced and administrative impositions are released from teachers' shoulders".

Discussion

Collecting all the required data from the target setting and participants, they were described and categorized thematically, or organizing segments of similar or related concepts together to assist in interpretation. Thus, the data gained are categorized in to three themes; namely the tasks preparation/selection, tasks presentation, and tasks integration with the grammar entities intended

to teach. Accordingly, though the themes are stemmed from the data each classroom's observation and teacher's interview in turn are analyzed in accordance to these themes.

I. Tasks preparation/selection: As Richards (2011), task-based instruction is an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal. Judd (1999) likewise maintain that in teaching the target language, the materials must reflect authentic language uses and be carefully selected, modified, or created for the language instruction.

Hence, the textbook, which is the benchmark of teaching-learning practice tried to prepare the grammar lesson using the PPP model of language teaching approach. This model is often employed for situational approach (Richards, 2011) because precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatize what is taught. Sample sentences are prepared followed by activities to be practice by students, and finally, students are required to complete a short story with appropriate verbs.

Having a common standardized situation, **T1** and **T2** used it in different ways of preparation or modification with different style of teaching. **T1** for example, modified/expanded the situations provided in the textbook in to students' actual experiences, whereas **T2** tried to adopt it with no thorough purpose. It is like "the dead cow is alive" when the material and method is not adapted well (Chowdhury, 2014). So, it was observed and triangulated from the interview that selecting the appropriate situation and task could obviously foster students' grammar learning.

II. Tasks presentation: This theme implies presenting information in the material in order to create meaning. Though the selected material (student's textbook) was same for both teachers, the way they presented was varied. **T1** tried to present the situation in a way suited for students' sociocultural life; and make most students involve actively. **T1** reflected as: "*present the material which intentionally selected allows me to control and regulate the process at ease*".

As Feez & Joyce (1998), learners are introduced to the social context of an authentic model of the text type being studied. **T1** explained in the interview like this, "I believe that presenting the lesson in situations which students are familiar with enhances learning opportunity than in a solid one." This was confirmed in the classroom observation. It was presented in a way students can grasp the situation easily. **T2** on the other hand, presented the grammar lesson with no artistic and lively delivery. The reason why is stated in her response for the interview, "When lessons are offered with situations where students are familiar with, they may expose to unnecessary disturbances".

“In addition, I want to finish the book coverage on, for the principals obliged us to do so”. In contrary to the above described delivery, Richards (2011) claimed,

“If a student doesn’t succeed, it is the teacher’s fault for not presenting the materials clearly enough. If a student doesn’t understand something, he/she must find a way to present it more clearly.”

Generally, though the topic to be taught, the level of students and the teaching material were same, each teacher used different approach of presentations. As a result, each teacher’s mode of delivery reflected on students’ level of participant and enjoys the grammar lessons.

III. Integrating Text with grammar: Specify the content or ends of learning and the tasks or means to those ends is not enough, but also to integrate them. An ideal strategy to make learners use the target language for daily usage is providing the skills integrate one another, and with the context familiar to learners’ sociocultural base. The new model of teaching L2, ESA (Engage, Study, and Activate) realizes this nature of teaching.

To some extent, **T1** made a miracle integration of skills and situation at large. He started from making students listen the instruction, read the situation in their textbook/prepared by the teacher, speak, write their own sentences on the board, share their opinion on the form of feedback, and finally teach the grammar lesson inductively. So, **T1** tried to apply the EEE model of Sysoyov (1999) to realize the purpose of teaching the target language.

However, **T2** tried to present the language skills in isolate form; started testing them, with no discussion the test’s purpose, she directed students to read their textbook and present their work one by one or else copy the note written by the teacher. Though the teacher follow the TTT (testing-teaching-testing) model, each steps did not integrated, and as a result students were confused with the fragmented lesson. Hence, though presenting all language aspects integrated way is the new fashion and widely accepted approach, deficiencies were observed in **T2**.

The ultimate goal of teaching a foreign language is to enable learners make utilize the language components for daily interaction. Hence, though EFL teachers are required to realize such integrations, most teachers are victim from the long lasted tradition of isolate presentation of entities. This was mainly manifested in **T2**’s lessons.

Conclusions and implications

In spite of the debates in selecting and employing approaches for foreign language teaching, the results of the study indicated that specific teaching approach could not be a guarantee to bring learners' grammar competence. Teacher's ability to identify learners' foreign language's grammar level, their relation with the environment, and design material fit with to enable learners develop their language competence is by far par amount.

Results show that the prefabricated tasks-based instruction is successful in teaching the grammar lesson, and has had an impact on teachers' use of the strategies and methods. Specifically:

1. Grammar and context/situation are inseparable entities while teaching a foreign language
2. Modify the situation and standard textbook in a way neither too wide nor too cramped rather able to offer inputs which are comprehended. This strategy is vital because standard teaching materials could not prepare to foster the actual usage of language in relation to learners' daily life.
3. Confine the wider context so as to controlled by teachers and students, and could maximize learning opportunities, and minimize teaching burdens.
4. Applying a particular language teaching model is by far difficult for EFL teachers, particularly in situation like Ethiopian classroom, where variety of students' identities are exist.

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