

Annexation of Co-curricular Activities: Experiencing and Assessing Grammar Competence in EFL Context

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education – Hawaii 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Over the past few years the annexation of co-curricular activities (CCAs) in experiencing learning and assessing grammar competence have increasingly been filtered into educational discourse in EFL context. The empirical evidence based on questionnaires shows that traditional methods in grammar learning do not foster learners' potential development and confidence in assessment tests. Learners are taught and assessed in different components of grammar following only academic resources via close tests. This paper proposed to include co-curricular activities with academic contents in weekly lesson plan in experiencing grammar learning and assessment tests to 25 cohort of 1st semester of the department of English at a private university in Bangladesh. This paper collected data through triangulation methods in the means of observation, interviews, and focus group discussion via the lens of socio-cultural theory (SCT). In this study, CCAs comprised drama, song, and debate to reinforce their ways of grammar learning, foster critical thinking and assess grammar competence amidst writing scripts, lyrics and speeches. It intended to launch a transformative approach with the inclusion of CCAs to remove inhibition and fear of the learners in grammar learning and assessment tests by creating collaborative intervention with peers, teacher and learning contents. This paper investigated CCAs facilitated academic grammar learning and worked as an effective means to engage learners comprehensively, reduce their affective filters implicitly, and thus, had a great impact on achievement of continuous classroom assessment. This paper may give a new vision of learning and assessing grammar to learners and teachers in EFL context.

Keywords: Experiencing Grammar learning, Co-curricular Activities, Transformative Approach, Assessing Grammar Competence, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Context

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Introduction

The benefits and significance of co-curricular activities (CCAs) gain its importance to be provided as an alternative means in experiencing grammar learning and assessment process in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. CCAs provide stress free social environment and offering these activities in teaching grammar along with academic content can be considered as valuable learning tool (Storey, 2010). According to Xiao and Luo (2009) conferring period to these activities facilitate learners to gain more comprehension about the subject matter. It is important to emphasize that learning content, the way of grammar learning and assessment process engage learners comprehensively, reduce their affective filters implicitly, and extend the assessment areas to attain inclusive competence. The grammar competence does not mean only achieving mere linguistic knowledge, rather attaining ability to apply the notion of tense and aspect to accommodate learners' communicative choices. Unlike objectivist or interactionist, transformative teaching, inspired by SCT (socio-cultural theory), is the activity of internalization and transformation of new ideas through thinking on and about these new ideas (Nehuruela-Azarola, 2003). It facilitate learners to reach potential areas through communicative activities to be able to consciously apply grammatical knowledge rather than just knowing the forms or having the skill to deploy endings in second language development. Therefore, the study included co-curricular activities following transformative approach to create stress free environment in learning and assessing grammar competence and let the student understand the significance of attaining grammar competence.

From grammar-translation method (GTM) to communicative language teaching (CLT) the perennial debate in the role of grammar, its instruction and the way of assessment leads the practitioners and researchers to go for new methods replacing grammar exercises with meaningful contexts (Brouke, 2008). A good number of research have been done on grammar learning with the inclusion of CCAs and found relationship measuring grade point average (Richie, 2018). Various authors have investigated association amid co-curricular activities and ESL (English as a Second Language) students' success (Mitchell, 2015). Some explored the links amidst co-curricular activities and academic engagement and self-efficacy (Wilson, et.al (2014). However, the way of grammar learning and assessment are still burning issues, especially in EFL context. The study draws researchers experience on the practice of applying transformative approach with the annexation of co-curricular activities in grammar learning and assessment process to attain comprehensive competence. The following study will show how CCAs following transformative approach can be an effective means to reduce inhibition and anxiety, reach potential areas and promote conceptual development in applying pragmatic, textual and grammatical concepts in second language development.

Background of the Study

Southeast university is a leading private university in Bangladesh where English is a foreign language. The department of English offers Basic English Skills course where different components of grammar are taught, e.g. tense, modals, articles, verb patter, preposition and so on by the students of first semester following different strategies. Although numerous research works have been done against direct instruction, many practitioners are continuing their grammar teaching and assessment focusing 'form'

or structure in EFL context (Brouke, 2008)). A good number of studies shows that extensive drilling, memorization are still the main ways in teaching grammar in school, college and university level in Bangladesh where learning English is mandatory (Shrestha, 2013). The way students learn grammar that has an empty structure, morphology and lexicon which requires to be presented, described, and explained through extensive drilling and memorization. The way of learning considers learners' mind as 'containers' where information will be put in and they will evoke those information during doing exercises and attending assessment tests. The assessment tests are held with discrete sentences or in the form of passage focusing 'form' to show their mastery in linguistic ability via cloze tests. The way of assessment is not process oriented rather product oriented and it never explores their ability in pragmatic, textual or grammatical concepts in second language development. It addresses only their understanding or comprehension. The way of grammar learning and assessment leads them to think language as an object, or a system. In 1997, CLT was introduced to language teaching and grammar learning following inductive approach in Bangladesh. The empirical study shows that language teaching highlights meaning in conventional communicative classroom where grammar is taught and assessed in focusing form and structure. In objectivist or interactionist approach, students do not get any further means to experience their grammar learning nor to gain confidence in assessment process through social and interpersonal activities.

Problem

These processes create challenges of "promoting conceptual reflection (i.e. the internalization and thus, transformation of new ideas through thinking on and about these new ideas" (Neguerela-Azarola, 2013b). This inability lacks critical thinking and rises affective filters higher of the learners. At tertiary level, when students are asked to develop any concept using the language, the main problem they face is in associating ideas with linguistic knowledge. The mere mastery of the form hinders them to think on or to generate new ideas in the language. They become puzzled and anxious in writing correct sentences that lowers their ability to learning and leads them to inhibition and fright to grammar learning and assessment. They never become conscious learner to orient their communicative choices.

Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to make a shift from form-focused grammar learning and assessment areas to reflection- based conceptual development. So, it tailored co-curricular activities with academic content following transformative approach to transform learners at their thinking, learning and assessment levels in experiencing and assessing grammar competence. Two main goals had been established by the researcher:

1. To reach potential areas through communicative activities in second language development rather than attaining mere comprehension in linguistic knowledge
2. To develop confidence by reducing fear and inhibition and increasing involvement and engagement in grammar learning process

Research Question

The identified problems stimulate the researcher to find out the right way in grammar instruction, and assessment process and inspire him to explore the answers through the following questions:

1. How do CCAs facilitate learners to achieve grammar competence?
2. How well can transformative approach be effective to teaching grammar?

Significance

The significant results of CCAs and transformative approach (TA) increased its usages in grammar learning and assessment process. This research is unique as it promotes strategic social interaction (Dipietro, 1987) and meaningful significant intra-action during learning different components of grammar, more specifically different sections of tense. This uniqueness nurtures learners' potentials to meet learning challenges, reduce inhibition and anxiety, create belongingness to the learning community, craft collaboration among peers-teachers-learning content and achieve the ability to consciously apply pragmatic, textual and grammatical concepts in foreign or second language development.

Data

The data is collected of 25 cohort of 1st semester in period from January 19, 2019 to April 29, 2019 in teaching different components of grammar, especially 'tense'.

Data Analysis

As the main goals of the study are to achieve the ability to consciously apply pragmatic, textual, and grammatical concepts and to reduce anxiety and inhibition and increase confidence in assessment process by ensuring their engagement and involvement in second language development, the analysis is to observe the trends over the period while CCAs are introduced following transformative approach in experiencing learning and assessing grammar competence.

The following topics are analyzed in more detail (from simple to complex sentences using different tenses): engagement level in experiencing grammar learning; scripts, lyrics and speeches writings; and oral performance in using these speeches to accommodate their communicative choices. These areas gave insightful merits to the researcher to find out the justification of applying transformative approach with the annexation of CCAs to achieve these goals in experiencing and assessing grammar competence.

These insightful merits were analyzed qualitatively through triangulation methods in the means of observation, interviews, and focus group discussion via the lens of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

Goals

The goal of this research is to achieve the ability to consciously apply grammatical concept in pragmatic and textual concepts through experiencing social and

interpersonal activities with the collaboration of peers, teachers and learning content during learning different components of grammar, i.e. 'tense'. The goal also want to reduce anxiety and inhibition and increase confidence in assessment process ensuring learners' engagement and involvement.

Frameworks for Actions

The Basic English Skills course is offered to the students of 1st semester for improving grammatical knowledge to develop language proficiency in four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The classes are held twice in a week. Along with midterm and final examination, classroom assessment is very important part of learning and achieving grammar competence. Students are assessed in the four skills throughout the semester in every class which give them opportunity and sufficient time to experience their learning through more practices with the inclusion of co-curricular activities following transformative approach.

According to ministry of education, Singapore (2018), co-curricular activities (CCAs) is an integral part of holistic education that fosters learners' critical thinking to meet their learning challenges, nurture their learning abilities to work within a given structure and construct creative outlook to their education and academics. These activities create their belongingness and community feeling to learning content. Stress free environment is the primary condition of successful L2 acquisition (Krashen 1981). As the CCAs create stress free environment, provide clarity and improve organizational skills and time management (Greg & Narelle, 2017) the researcher transformed their experiencing learning and assessment content into scripts, lyrics and speeches writings and oral performance playing drama, song and debate respectively.

Whereas SCT or socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) views learning as inherently a social process activated through the 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)' (Dillenbourge, 1999), transformative approach inspired by SCT focus on 'zone of potential development (ZPOD)' (Negureula-Azarola, 2013b). The ZPOD concept leads to think language development is the result of a process of appropriation and internalization of concepts mediated by social and interpersonal activities (Gracia, 2012). According to Negureula-Azarola (2015) Transformative pedagogies for the ELT classroom are about engaging and contributing with others in social interaction and this is the origin of conceptual intra-action in L2 learning and development. The development implies that a learner is grammatically correct when speaking or writing not because knowing the forms or skill to adopt endings but they understand and able to apply the notion of tense and aspect to orient their communicative choices (Gracia, 2012).

The worthy themes of co-curricular activities following transformative approach, the possibility of its usages to grammar learning and success in second language development stimulate the researcher to cultivate the following issues to achieve the competence:

1. To change the pre-occupied mind set up of previous way of grammar learning and assessment
2. To learn in collaboration with peers, teacher and learning content
3. To remove fear and inhibition
4. To foster critical thinking on and to generate new ideas

5. To create space to experience the learning between learning and assessment
6. To extend the areas of assessment process
7. To shift from ZPD to ZPOD in learning process
8. Performance are important part of achieving competence
9. Drama, song and debate are interesting and relaxing activities

Actions

The way of learning took place in two steps: learning and experiencing learning. The assessment also extended its areas to engagement and confidence in applying the knowledge of Tense. As students were already aware of the rules or form because of their school and college levels grammar learning, ample examples have been taken from different sources to give them opportunity to review their knowledge of 'Tense'. They were also asked to relate those information to their own lives that led them to think on and helped them to create new knowledge through writing and speaking. The errors and mistakes were corrected in collaboration with peers, teachers and learning content through participation and discussion. The pre-occupied mind set up of the way of form-focus grammar learning had been removed showing the importance of creativity in developing second language.

The uniqueness of this study is that the learners experienced learning 'Tense' amidst writing scripts, lyrics and speeches in a group in and out of classroom. Five students were in each group where strategic social interaction (Dipietro, 1987) and meaningful significant intra-action (Garcia, 2012) ensure every ones' almost equal participation to writings. Students were guided not only to write but also to practice verbally and present their assignment in the form of drama, song or debate in classroom through performing these activities. The assessment process observed not only accuracy but also their ability to orient their communicative choices in generating new knowledge and developing the language in writings. The assessment process also observed their confidence level during performing their assigned topic to ensure their engagement and involvement and to reduce their anxiety and inhibition. The researcher kept the record of observation by taking note in prescribed form. As these activities and assignment were included in weekly lesson plan, they could experience this practice throughout the semester to strengthen their ability in applying grammatical knowledge to develop pragmatic, textual concepts. The interviews and focus-group discussion provided learners positive perception and interest in the way of learning and assessing grammar competence.

Results and Discussions

The combination of all aforementioned actions and steps showed the positive trends in facilitating grammar learning and assessment. The assessment were focused on accuracy, ability to orient communicative choices and ability to develop concept in generating new knowledge of the language. Each group got the opportunity to experience their learning five times. Every time the trends in these areas went up. In general, the accuracy level increased from 50% to 80%; ability to orient communicative choices boosted from 40% to 70% and conceptual development enhanced from 60% to 80%.

The actions and steps of learning and assessment also increased learners' engagement level. The engagement have been ensured through observing their participation and interest. The stress free and relaxed values of CCAs increased their belongingness and interest. The level of inhibition and anxiety were also reduced.

The participants to experiencing grammar learning comprehended and acknowledged through their interviews and focus group discussion that they should not only have grammar knowledge to achieve accuracy but also need to achieve the ability to consciously apply grammatical knowledge in developing concept. They believed stress free environment was very important to nurture their abilities to learning. They thought that classroom learning should promote group work outside of classroom that would facilitate and accelerate doing social and interpersonal activities under the umbrella of CCAs following transformative approach.

The annexation of co-curricular activities following transformative approach let the students to learn grammar going beyond academic learning content in and out of classroom. Their writing topic required logical, emotional and communicative expression along with accuracy amidst writing scripts, lyrics and speeches. They rehearsed several times about what to say and write for performing drama, song and debate. In writing they got feedback from each other not only in correcting form or structure, but also in choosing lexical item and developing concept. These steps reinforced their grammar learning and promoted them to reach potential areas through these communicative activities. These learning process and activities created their community feeling and belongingness to the learning topic and helped them to remove inhibition and reduce anxiety to grammar learning. As every group performed in classroom, they gave more effort out of classroom for better performance. This environment created the space for autonomous learning and increased their self-esteem and confidence. This way of learning and learning activities facilitated the teacher to consider their writing and oral performance as part of their continuous classroom assessment as well.

The researcher had collected data from the beginning of the semester and analyze these trends till the end of the semester. The researcher found positive trends not only with one group but also with rest of the four groups. The performance varied from group to group in writing and speaking but all groups showed upward trends to their abilities.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study revealed some significant results regarding the way of grammar learning, the importance of inclusion CCAs in experiencing grammar learning and extending the areas in assessing grammar competence. The learning steps and assessment process gave the learners opportunity to experience their grammar learning, brought changes to their traditional way of grammar learning, helped them to know how to achieve inclusive grammar competence. The study showed co-curricular activities following transformative approach reduced learners' inhibition and fright; increased engagement and confidence level; promoted communicative activities to reach potential areas through internalization and transformation of new ideas; and helped them to attain the ability to orient their communicative choices and consciously apply grammatical concepts to attain

inclusive competence in second language development. The study requires further research to do with more students focusing other grammatical components. These achievements require more effort by the students and teacher. The importance and significance of annexation of co-curricular activities following transformative approach in experiencing and assessing grammar competence give a new vision to learners and teachers in EFL context.

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