

The Sentence Pattern Approach in Teaching the English Tenses: Problems in Achieving the Communicative Goals

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Abstract

The awareness of communicative teaching of English has been realized since long time ago. In Indonesia, the wish to make the communicative ability as a goal of the teaching English in our schools, both the junior high schools and senior high schools, can be traced back from the development of the school curricula from time to time. However, the ways or approaches used by many teachers seem not yet successful in making the students able to communicate. One of the possible drawbacks causing this “failure” is the inappropriate approach to teaching the English grammar, especially the tenses. This paper discusses the problems that may appear in teaching the English tenses in relation to achieving the communicative goals. The teaching of the tenses should not make the students find it difficult to use the language communicatively. The sentence pattern approach in teaching them can cause problems in achieving this goal.

Key words: *communicative goal, tenses, sentence pattern approach*

I. Introduction

The attention to grammar in the teaching English, as in other foreign languages, has always been very serious. From the oldest and the most traditional method or approach, the Grammar-Translation Method or Approach (GTM), to the latest and the most communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the grammar has never been fully deleted from teaching foreign languages. The point that has made a difference about the grammar is the treatment of the methods/approaches about the teaching of the grammar itself or about the place of the grammar in the language teaching.

If we trace them back again from the most traditional method which was really completely grammatical (GTM) to the latest and the most communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), we can see again through a careful observation the “aroma” of the grammaticality and how each of the methods or the approaches treated (has treated) the grammar in its teaching. The popular methods or approaches (among others) are the Grammar-Translation Method/Approach (GTM), the Direct Method (DM), the Audiolingual Method/Approach (ALM), and the other methods/approaches emerging in the seventies and the eighties. The methods/approaches emerging in the nineties are also named the “Designer Methods of the Spirited of the Nineties”. The methods/approaches belonging to this group are the Community Language Learning (CLL), the Suggestopedia (SP), the Silent way (SW) and the Total Physical Response (TPR) (Brown, 1994). The other two popular methods/approaches of the eighties are the Natural Approach (NA) and the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (also see Brown, 1994).

In the following explanations, I wish show you in short how the grammar was (is) still there in each of the methods/approaches. The explanations will remind you again that the grammar has always been regarded or even “appreciated” as an important factor or element to be put into the curricula, even though treated or appeals in different ways in the methods/approaches. In the GTM, the grammar became a very important element in its teaching of the foreign language. The grammar –even- was taught and was discussed explicitly often called the deductive teaching of the grammar. The importance of teaching the grammar of the language being learned was based on the aim of teaching a foreign language at that time was to make the learners able to read the literature (text) of the foreign language. The ability was

shown through the learners' ability in translating the literature (texts) of the foreign language into the learners' own language and vice versa. To be able to translate the literature or texts, the learners had to have good mastery of the grammar of the language because the grammar also plays an important role in making the meanings of the text.

Just like the GTM, the DM also applied the grammar as an important factor in mastering a foreign language but treated in a different way in its teaching. As a reaction to the weakness of the GTM which did not give any attention to production of oral speech of the learners (or too little, if any), the DM was mainly aimed at providing the learners with the ability to speak. The DM maintained the importance of the grammar as well as the pronunciation of the language being learned. This is to help learners become accurate speakers of the language. Another difference between the GTM and the DM in treating the grammar lies on the way they "give" the grammar to the learners. As mentioned above, the GTM gave the grammar explicitly to the learners or --in other words-- in a deductive way, while the DM taught the grammar inductively to the learners which means that the grammar was not explained but the students are expected to grasp it from the example sentences used or uttered by the teacher in his English interaction with the learners directly.

The ALM which was formerly originated from the Army Method, the method of teaching a foreign language for the US Army during World War 2, also stressed on the accuracy of the grammar. Through its intensive use of the pattern practice, the DM expected very much that the "learners" could use the language being learned grammatically correct. Moreover, the wrong use of the grammar must be directly corrected. This was aimed at making the learners able to use grammatically correct sentences.

The "Designer Methods of the Spirited of the Nineties" the Community Language Learning (CLL), comprising of the Suggestopedia (SP), the Silent way (SW) and the Total Physical Response (TPR) were also grammatical to some extent. The CLL taught the learners in a small class, usually in a circle, where, at the beginning, the learners were provided with teachers, popularly known as "knowers". In the teaching, the learners asked the knowers for help in their mother tongue or in the language they understand. Then, the knowers helped the learners translate into the language being learned to be said to the other class members. In his "translated utterances/sentences", the knowers must keep them grammatically correct.

The SW, even though it was not so popular due to the very limited time available for the teacher, also stressed its teaching to the correctly produced sentences. Any mistake or error made by the learner would be corrected in such a "wise" way by the teacher.

The SW also used the grammar in its teaching even-though in a unique way which was not very well appreciated by teachers. Its unique correction of the mistake/error made by the students had made it unpopular to the teaching around the world. The TPR which was designed especially for the very beginner learners did not neglect the grammar, even it stressed the use of correct grammar even though the grammar of interest was only about the imperatives. This activity was done until they were ready to speak. Of course, example sentences used by the teacher must be correct grammatically. The CLT also taught the grammar but in more humanistic way by letting any device to use as long as it help learners in their struggle to communicate.

From the explanations about the methods approaches above, the grammar was actually newer neglected; it was regarded important in mastering a language. However, each of the methods/approaches treated the grammar of the language being learned differently.. This different treatment made the methods different to each other. In the Indonesian schools, the treatment or the presentation of the grammar has also been not the same. The differences may be caused by the different levels of education as seen in the curricula.

In line with the methods/approaches mentioned above, the grammar (of English) has always been in the schools curricula, from the senior high schools to the university in Indonesia. This means that these is an awareness that the grammar of the language has always been regarded important to be learned by our learners of English. All I can remember as an SMA

teacher of Proyek Perintis Sekolah Pembangunan (PPSP) IKIP Padang and as a “teacher” of IKIP Padang – our curricular contents have also been colored by the grammar.

Even the three latest curricula of our schools, either the Junior High Schools and Senior High Schools: The KBK curriculum, the KTSP curriculum and the 2013 curriculum have put the grammatical contents as a part of the curricular contents. On the hand, since 1970’s or 1980’s the awareness making communicative ability become the goal of language teaching has been very strong (see the methods/approaches appear in this period) Widdowson different from Littlewood and other experts or language teaching methodologists, even, urged not to teach grammar at all. According to him, language should/could be taught without the teaching of its grammar.

Until now, however, in general, Indonesian schools’ curricula still include the grammar of the English as an important part of this curricula. We, especially educated persons, know that what is more important now about language learning is the ability to use it, not the good mastery of its grammar. However, we realize what a good use of the language requires a good mastery of its grammar (accuracy) and fluent use of the language (fluency).

Even though we realize that both accuracy and fluency of the language use are ‘wanted’ but in Indonesia where English is a foreign language (EFL), it is almost impossible to achieve the two requirements at the same time or simultaneously. We know that the focus on the grammar can disturb the achievement of fluency in the communications, especially if the focus or the stress of teaching the language is on the tenses of English. In my mind, the teaching now should/have to be focused on the ability to use the language without neglecting the tenses. For this, the teachers of English should lessen the grammatical burden in their teaching but, anyhow, the grammar (say the tenses) is there.

This paper is trying to give my view points of about how to lessen the grammatical burden through minimizing the memory of sentence patterns of the tenses (as have been practiced so far).

II. Discussion

A. The ultimate goal of teaching English (in general)

We all have believed and experienced that, historically, language was firstly created or ‘given’ by the God (Allah SWT) to help the human beings communicate. Prophet Adam was taught the language, after the creation was surely aimed at providing him with the means of communication: language, with his wife, Eve, in paradise/heaven. Then, the language was continually used with his big family on the earth. Naturally, the aim of the teaching English to our learners should also be based on or be aimed at the “God’s mission” of giving and blessing the human beings with the language: to communicate to each other to convey the roles in their life.

In relation to English language teaching, the goal of teaching must be clearly and appropriately defined because it is vital to success of the teaching and learning of the language (Davis and Pearse, 2008: 3) They add that to achieve the ultimate goal of teaching and learning English, short-term objectives are very important to define or formulate in order to make it easy for the teachers and the learners to have a feeling of progress. However, they, both teachers and the learners, may not forget or lose sight to the overall long-term goal of English language teaching, to enable the learners to communicate effectively, and as far as possible accurately in English.

Even though they stress the ultimate goal of teaching and learning English is to enable the learners to communicate effectively, and as far as possible accurately, Davies and Pearse (2008) conclude the goal of different courses, at least, may appear to be any of the following:

1. To enable the learners to communicate in real English, both spoken and written.
2. To enable the learners to read technical publication in real English.
3. To get the learners memorize English grammar rules and vocabulary.

As mentioned previously, anyway, Davies and Pierse say that the ideal goal of the English language teaching is number 1 (one), that is, to communicate in “real English”. The problem to/in our English language teaching is that even though the goal in the syllabus is stated to be like in number 1 (one) or 2 (two) above, in practice, our teachers of English tried to teach the grammar because they find it easier to teach the it (mostly explained in the forms of sentence-pattern or formula presentation to memorize). Consequently, this grammar (say the tenses) presentation will not make the learners able to communicate: to use the language effectively and fluently. One of the teachers functions which is very often highlighted now (words of mouth) is the function of being a facilitator in teaching. To facilitate the learners- in my mind- can be done by minimizing the learning burdens (loads) of the learners.

The less learning burdens the learners find in his learning, the more attention they can pay for it and the more interest they will show to the lesson. When the learners have already maintained the attention and interest in their learning, their participation will also increase and, consequently, their understanding, their knowledge and skills will increase: a good result in achieved. Teacher should know “...the good sign of good teaching is the attention and interest shown by the learners.” (Davies and Pearse, 2008:4). When the learners have paid serious attention and shown a good interest to their learning, this means they have shown the good motivation. When well or highly motivated learners learn, they will do better in (second) language acquisition (Krashen, 1983). The maintenance of motivation (attention and interest) plays a very important role in the achievement of the ultimate goal of English language teaching soon: to be able to use the language effectively, that is, to communicate in English.

B. The grammar presentation in the classroom and the books used

This part will present to you about how the grammar, especially the tenses, of English is presented or introduced by either the PLPG teachers (the teachers of English who joined the Professional Teacher Certification Program held by UNP in cooperation with Diknas/Dikbud and Depag), the Micro Teaching students and some English books used by SMA students.

It is worth informing you, the readers/participants, that I have been involved in PLPG program as an instructor for years, and have also been involved continuously in the team of Micro Teaching at UNP Padang (since it was formerly IKIP Padang) and several other non-government educational institutions, such as Universitas Bung Hatta, Universitas Muhammad Yamin, STKIP PGRI Sumbar, and STKIP Yayasan Dharma Bhakti.

Through my careful observation on the PLPG Teachers (trainees), the Micro Teaching students’ ways of teaching, either on the teaching of the language skills and the language components, I have written down all the important points on the both the positive and negative aspects (the strengths and the weaknesses) of their teaching.

To my observation, I have found that all of the PLPG teachers who taught the grammar, especially the tenses, of English wrote the sentence patterns of each kind type of the sentences, such as the positive, negative and the interrogative (yes/no and WH-questions) kinds (types). For a positive type of the Simple Present Tense, a teacher wrote these sentence patterns, as follows:

First and plural person:

- S + Verb 1 + Object/Complement + Time signal

Third person singular:

- S +

V1+s	+ Object/Complement + Time signal
V1+es	
V1+ies	

For the other tenses, a teacher wrote almost likewise. The difference lies only in the characteristics of the tenses and other features of the sentence patterns. To finish the teaching of

a tense, a teacher wrote/introduced the other sentence patterns of each type or kind. To continue the presentation of the Simple Present Tense, he did this way:

Negative:

1. First and plural person:
S + do not + Verb 1 + object/complement + time signal
2. Third person singular
S + does not + Verb 1 + object/complement + time signal

In a more analytical way (if not “crazier” way), another teacher wrote:
S + do + not + Verb 1 + object/complement + time signal

And:

S + does + not + Verb 1 + object/complement + time signal

Even, in a way made “simpler”, a teacher simplified the sentence patterns negative:

- S + do/does + not + Verb 1 + object/complement + time signal.

To give more data about the tenses are presented in the sentence pattern approach, these examples are taken from several books (*lembaran kerja siswa/LKS*) to whose titles are not mentioned here for the sake of their reputation.

1. Tense : The Present Continuous Tense
Pattern : S + have/has + been + V-ing + O + ...
2. Tense : The Simple Present Tense
Pattern : (+) S + V1
(-) S + does/do + not + VO
(?) Does/do + S VO
3. Tense : Varied (in causative “have and get”)

a.

Subject	- Have - Has - Will have - Is/am/are having - Had - Have/has/had	object	V
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b.

Subject	- Get - Gets - Will get - Is/am/are getting - Got - Have/has got	Object	To invinitive
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c.

Subject	- Have/has - Will - Is/am/are having - Had - Have/has/had	Object	V3
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d.

Subject	- Get - Gets - Will get - Is/am/are getting - Got - Have/has got -	Object	V
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4. Tense : The Present Perfect Tense (I)
Patterns:

a. Positive : S + have/has + V3

I We You They	} have	V3
She He It	} has	V3

b. Negative : S + have/has not + V3

c. Interrogative : Have/has + S + V3

Tense : The Present Perfect Tense (II)

Patterns :

a.

(+)	S +	Have / has	+ V III + O
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b.

(-)	S +	Have / has	Not + V III + O
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c.

(?)	Have/has	S +	+ V III + O + ?
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Tense : The Present Perfect Tense (III)

Patterns :

a. (+) S + have/has + V III + O

b. (-) S + have/has + not + V III + O

c. (?) Have/has + S + V III +)

5. Tense : The Present Progressive Tense

Patterns: (+) S + is/am/are + V-ing

(-) S+ is/am/are + not + V-ing

(?) Is/am/are + S + V-ing

6. Tense : The Past Continuous Tense
Patterns :
a. S + was/were + v-ing + When + S + V II
b. S + was/were + verb-ing + certain time in the past
7. Tense : The Present Perfect Tense
Patterns :
a. (+) S + have/has + V III + O
b. (-) S + have/has + not + V III + O
c. (?) have/has + S + V III + O
8. Tense : The Present Simple Tense
Patterns :
a. Verbal
1. (+) S + V (s/es)
2. (-)S + do/does + not + V(1)
3. (?) do/does + S + V (1)
b. Nominal :
1. (+) S + to be + N/a/adv
2. (-) S + to be (not) + n /a/adv

C. Communicative Language Teaching

This part will describe what teachers and learners of English do and the situation needed to achieve the goal of communicative language teaching.

The not-easy job of a teacher of English is to make the learners 'want' to use their English, especially in the classroom, in other words, they need to have motivation and not anxious to use it. Whereas many (if most) students have the feeling of anxiety and are worried to judge stupid (Brown, 1994). The teacher must be able to arouse the students' motivation in studying and using English. He may not make their learning difficult and boring. One of ways of motivating them is by not using the "boring" and "tiring" sentence – patterns approach in his teaching. The sentence – patterns as described above are not easy to understand and the approach almost does not help learners to achieve the communicative goal: to use the language effectively and fluently by avoiding the use of the approach, the teacher has lessened the learning burden psychologically.

In a language, as English, grammar is really important but it should be learned in order to help the learners communicate, and not be memorized. The "grammar learning" may not hinder the effort to use the language. That is why the teaching of grammar must be made simple and fun. If not made simple and fun, it will also block fluency in communication.

D. The problems caused by the use of the sentence- pattern approach in achieving the Communicative goals.

1. The number of patterns to memorize
As mentioned above if all the tenses are taught to the learners and each of the tenses introduces 4 patterns : the positive, negative and the interrogative (yes/no and wh-question), there will be 64 patterns to memorize. This number is only for the active sentences. If the patterns of the passive sentences are included, so there will be another 64 patterns for this type. To sum up, there are 128 patterns to be memorized altogether.
2. The transitive and the intransitive cases
Transitive verbs need an object whereas intransitive verbs do not need an object of the verbs. On the other hand, the sentence patterns used by the teachers, micro

teaching students and 3 books (*LKS*) used at schools are about the patterns for the transitive verbs {see no. 1: the present continuous tense and no. 2: the simple present tense (-) and (+)}. The presentation of the sentence is also made simple as in no. 2 : The simple present tense (+). This pattern neglects the possible presence of an object

3. Using (long) sentence – patterns in the teaching of grammar, especially the tense of English will make the learners see that the learning of language forms, structures and rules as the main purpose of the course (Davis and Pearse, 2008). If the learners think that these are the main purpose, they will, of course, pay their attentions to them. Consequently their communication will not be fluent or even ‘fail’. Whereas in a communicative class, fluency and accuracy of the language use must be balanced because fluency and accuracy are important goals in communicative language teaching (Brown, 1994:254).
4. The sentence elements which are made in the sentence pattern approach do not represent all the elements human beings use in the communication.

III. Conclusion and Suggestion

To conclude the explanation above, I just want to say that the sentence-pattern approach in the teaching of English whose aim is to make the learners to use the language is not appropriate. The teaching of grammar should only highlight the form and the usage (function) of the grammar, especially the tenses. In addition, the teachers of English should also clarify the semantic meaning of the language, and then, provide them with the communicative activity for them to practice. That is why, I strongly suggest that teachers not use it in their teaching for communicative purposes.

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