



**ORGANISING COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES
EFFECTIVELY IN TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR
IN A HIGH SCHOOL IN CAN THO CITY, VIETNAM**

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the effective organization of communicative activities in the periods of teaching English grammar skill. The site of this study was High school Teacher Practice-Can Tho University, in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol were the two main tools in gathering data from students and teachers of English at a high school. First, the research analyzed the problems of organizing “communicative activities” in teaching English grammar in high school. The problems related to teachers’ communicative method preference, the deep knowledge of communicative activities, and methodology compromise between teachers and students. They also were the noise and disorder acceptance, readiness for hard work, and the deep knowledge of English and wide understanding life. Moreover, role play is the challenge for weak students and the requirement for them. The troubles concerning with a structure were the most difficulties for students. On the other hand, this study found that noise, disorder, grouping were some suggestions for more effective communicative activities. Besides, furniture and seating arrangement, choice of genres and topics of game, monitoring and time limitation also were the best solutions for better communicative activities in teaching grammar.

ⁱTỔ CHỨC CÁC HOẠT ĐỘNG GIAO TIẾP HIỆU QUẢ TRONG DẠY NGỮ PHÁP TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG TRUNG HỌC PHỔ THÔNG Ở THÀNH PHỐ CẦN THO, VIỆT NAM

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1. Introduction

We all know that speaking is one of four main skills in acquiring a foreign language. Nevertheless, in most high schools in Vietnam, English is taught non-communicatively, especially in grammar periods. The reason is that Vietnamese teachers perceive proficiency as excellence in grammar rather than communicative facility. And hence, they remain loyal to traditional lecturing mode in the language classroom. However, many educators observed that students could not use accurate sentence patterns in communicating outside the classroom although they could master them in the grammar lesson (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Indeed, to succeed in learning English, not only mastering linguistic structures but also using learnt structures to speak is required (Mohamed, 2015). Sadly, our recent popular kinds of controlled grammar practice like repetition, substitution or transformation cannot be functioned to be a useful tool to create the relaxing environment for students to speak freely.

The study's clear purpose is to popularize and facilitate the teachers' using fluency-based activities when lecturing patterns in conditioned high schools in our country in order that the students' communicative skills can be developed perfectly. Although it is entirely difficult to convince educators as well as participants to adapt communicative activities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Classifying the types of communicative activities

2.1.1. Controlled communicative activities

Communicative activities are plentiful and various. Among them, some simple ones which are often used in grammar practice in high school are guessing games and information gap exercises and the activities in which students exchange personal information (Sovenda, 2010). In general, they are controlled communicative games, but they can supply students with helpful communicative practice.

a) Guessing games

They are understandingly, the games in which one student must find out the information hidden by his or her friend by asking yes-no questions and guessing from his or her partner's simple "yes" or "no" answer (Sovenda, 2010). Guessing games can also be organized in groups. Then, one student in each group may have a secret piece of information and the others guess by asking different questions. Guessing games may ask students to guess the picture, sentences or the mine.

b) Information gap exercise

Often, students work in pairs and the two students in each pair receive different pieces of information or different pictures. The activities can work in various ways (Sovenda, 2010). One student has some information, and the other student has to find it out by asking questions. For example: Students sit in pairs. In each pair, one has an empty grid and the other has a small text. They do not look at each other's information. The student with the grid must ask questions to complete the grid. One student has some information and tells it to his or her partner. For instant: Students sit in pairs. In each pair, one is a customer and has a shopping list. The other is a shop assistant, and has a list of items in the shop and their prices. Of course, they do not look at each other's lists. The customer student asks questions according to the structure "have you got..." and may ask the prices of the shopping items.

c) Exchanging personal information (questionnaires and surveys)

Students exchange ideas about their own lives, interests, experiences in pairs or groups. When students talk about themselves, the others will note down necessary information for filling the grid (Sovenda, 2010). Instead of working in groups, the class may work together. Each student can go around the classroom interviewing anyone they like and take note what his or her friends say to complete the grid later. This is often beneficial because it allows students to move and interact with variety of people.

2.1.2. Freer communicative activities

In addition to three above things, communicative games also include questionnaire, interview, role-play, discussion, problem-solving, etc.. However, sometimes one or more kinds may be included to another. For example, occasionally, interview or information gap may be role-play

a) Role-play

According to Mellisa (2019), role-play is a way of bringing situation, from real life into the classroom. When we do role-play, we ask students to imagine a role (e.g. student imagine to be a farmer) or a situation (e.g. students imagine to plan a holiday). Or both (e.g. students imagine to be a police officer asking about the lost bag). Role-play is of reading a dialogue aloud. In role-play, students must improvise. Although the situation is fixed, students must make up suitable words to say as they go along (Sovenda, 2010).

b) Problem-solving

Students are asked to find multiple solutions to technical, human or cultural problems and to express themselves within a given set of grammar structures (Natalia, 2015). For example, students are asked to find solutions to the following problem: Your friend has stolen your money for many times. What do you have to do with him now?

2.2. The importance of communicative activities in teaching grammar in high school

2.2.1. The theoretical base of grammar and the grammatical system officially used

a) What is grammar?

This term is very ambiguous. To see why, grammar is, reportedly, penetrate in three principally different senses. The first meaning -mental grammar makes mention of the rules and principals which native speakers use in producing and comprehending their language. These rules and principles are required, chiefly, in childhood and are in the mind of native users. Next, descriptive grammar hints at the set of generalizations describes precisely by grammarians. In other words, it is the efforts by grammarians to supply visible analogs to the invisible mental grammar (mentioned above) of native speakers. Lastly, prescriptive grammar refers to certain classes of language rules based on the kind of English trusted property of the most educated speakers of the language (Rhalmi, 2020).

b) The grammatical system

In Vietnam, seeing that most syntactic lessons in high schools are taught according to grammatical structures, the comprehensive grammatical system is, broadly speaking, structure-based. Until recently, selecting textbook structures is mostly established by the standard of simplicity. That criterion from simple to complex is of our Ministry of Education and Training who, with power, compile English textbooks with an unchangeable sequence of grammar points. Frankly, this arrangement eases teachers to present only one new structure at a time. Furthermore, our students can get good marks, to the extent that these written tests and exams are, principally, to value learners' competence of grammar rules and test their "usage" of "learnt" structures only. Though, organizing grammar classes according to structures can't enable to the students to communicate lucratively. To boot, our prescriptive grammatical system, nowadays, can't furnish general coverage of English grammar. Such selective and easily understood grammars cause the school grammars generalization to become, to put it bluntly, "tidied up" and abbreviated (Cameron, 2013).

In conclusion, our pedagogical system of English grammar is still weak and ineffective since it impossibly develops the students' productive skills. However, it is a big issue of which the Ministry of Education and Training is in charge. Here exist communicative activities that are believed to improve, partly, the incomplete system of teaching grammar. The appearance of interactive games in traditional structure-based lessons will be a smart combination of old and new methods each of which has its own advantages and disadvantages. Particularly, the benefits from using these kinds of activity to instruct forms are listed in the next parts.

2.2.2. The importance of communicative activities in teaching grammar

a) Communicative activities help students develop communicative skills

Realistically, the past tendency to inculcate grammatical formulas, focusing too much on choral drilling, gap-filling, substitution, and transformation exercises still prevails in

most high schools in Vietnam. This out-of-date is just useful for memorizing structures like a parrot or for handling English in written form only. Meanwhile, language is unpredictable and creative (Sovenda, 2010) and language is also use inventive and is not a form of habitual behavior. To see why, speakers can create new sentences when speaking and understand new sentences created by others (Rhalmi, 2020). This truth is, as well as, recognized by Sovenda (2010) that there is a traditional gap between traditional practice and the way we communicate in real life. In fact, structural drills, despite their usefulness in practicing the structure, can't prepare students well for real world conversation if employed solely (Sovenda, 2010). It, therefore, unavoidably leads to the learners' incapacity to exploit the English language to show their own ideas and feelings.

b) Communicative activities develop communication strategies and skills

Playing productive games, performers are exercised to be accustomed to diverse species of communicative strategies. That means, they are acquainted with the ways to overcome obstacles in classroom conversation. Similarly, communicative activities are trusted to improve some other skills related to communication through encouraging attendance to speak. It is seen that to prolong or, at least, maintain the interaction, performers are listening attentively to their counterparts, trying to take notes, catch the main points, analyze the ideas, brainstorm quickly, and so on. All of these mental and physical actions – communicative actions – rapidly evolve with the assistance closer to guess, prediction, imagination and improvisation which enrich communication skills. All in all, communicative activities have been shown to be effective aids to communication in classroom (Sovenda, 2010), and hence, they positively develop students' communication strategies and skills.

c) Communicative activities facilitate learning grammar

A structure often consists of three major aspects: form, meaning and use (Sovenda, 2010). In reality, all of these aspects are taught in a grammar lesson in most high schools. Though, learners' stills feel a structure in theory, and even in controlled practice, less memorable and distinguished. The reason is that the same structure used in different contexts may convey different meanings and functions which can't be predicted to introduce by professors (Rohmatillah, 2003).

d) Communicative activities function as reinforcement, review and enrichment

According to Jack (2002), communicative activities are organized at the last stage to consolidate what has been presented at the first stage. Indeed, playing these kinds of game together with using the new structure is an effective way for students to stick the new knowledge to their mind. As for teachers, they can have immediate feedback from players to know how much of the knowledge is acquired and with problems should be solved (Mohamed, 2015). And, as presented in the initial chapter, communicative activities have a special characteristic: choice. That means, during game time, participants have, officially, their own determination of what to say and how to say. Consequently,

not only the fresh structure but other previously learnt ones are also used to finish tasks, and thereby, culminating in the ideal environment for reinforcing, reviewing and enriching the items taught. And, needless to say, communicative activities supplement free practice to refresh boring ways of repeating, substituting or transforming. In summary, communicative activities are helpful tools to strengthen recall the linguistic competence and add variety to practice in class.

e) Other profits from communicative activities

Communicative activities were for long reflected to be nearly similar to a red herring in a language classroom due to two central supporting elements: visual aids and diversity of games. Clearly, when communicative activities are in hand, they are usually supported by many sorts of visual aids such as pictures, posters, flashcards, drawings, and so on (Sovenda, 2010).

3. Methodology

During the development of the study, a series of methods have been used selectively. Above all, a collection of methods comprises geography survey, option survey, observation and semi-structured interviews to retrieve and capture vital data. Next, the researchers handled many other methods such as data analysis, comparison, contrast, statistics, dialectics, and historical materialism, deduction, induction, analogy, and synthesis. And the last one – systematization - is to arrange all of the ideas generated from reading reference materials and investigating, researching Chau Van Liem's English teaching and learning in a rational and logical sequence.

Different from pure second-hand researches, this one requires more than book and magazine reference. Indeed, my allotted time is mostly spent surveying, observing and interviewing. Furthermore, the instruments for this half-action research includes two well-made questionnaires, interview sheets and one observation sheet that are carefully arranged in the appendix.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Noise and disorder

That large classes with communicative activities are conspicuously disordered, boisterous and even clamorous in some cases readily makes a strong impact on the surroundings and obstructs the organizer's class control (Sovenda, 2010). It must be in consequence restricted as much as possible. At the beginning of the course, teachers should emphasize that learners are allowed to speak and laugh a great deal but, obligatorily, in low voice. Gradually, doing tasks in whisper will be habituated and students will find lowering volume in speaking natural and comfortable. They are, moreover, aware that noise and unruliness silences their teacher's commands and badly influences not only neighbor classes but also themselves. Even so, to limit violators, it is

advisable for organizers to have an assistant – a student supervisor – who helps them to go around a certain class area to warn players of breaking game lowers and remind them of medium voice.

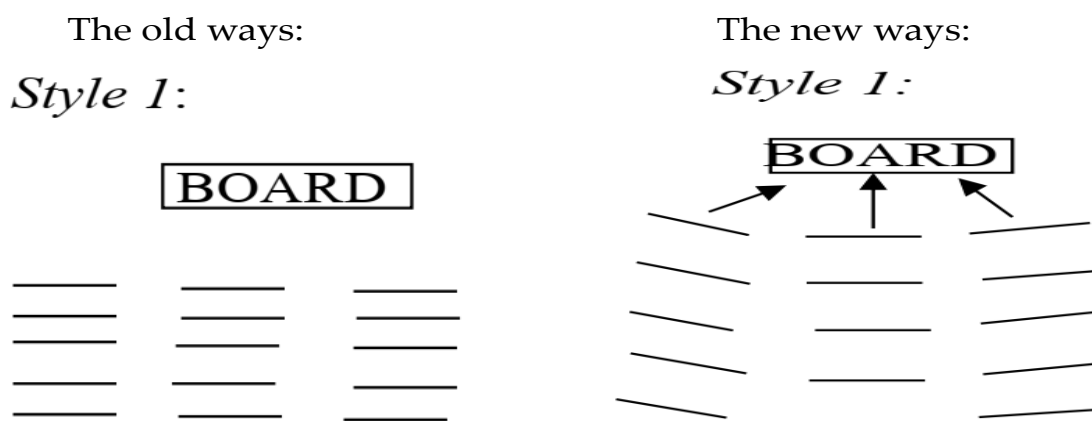
4.2. Grouping

If rivals are in the same pair, or the performers with too unbalanced levels are in the same group, communicative activities can't be profitable. In fact, the relationship between interlocutors is immensely significant, rather than context, conversational aim or topic of conversation (Lucja, 2008). Therefore, teachers must understand relations among their pupils profoundly to avoid obliging a learner to work with his enemy. And, in a group, miscellaneous level and personalities are essentially succored, to the extent that quieter members might benefit from the input supplied by talkative ones and the eminent also benefit from using English much to explain, paraphrase or repeat their ideas to the weaker (Tugba, 2016). Yet, too unbalanced levels in a group need hindering for fear that the students' communication continuously gets stuck. Moderation in groups is, accordingly, called for: moderately balanced levels, moderately good student relationship and suchlike.

4.3. Furniture and seating arrangement for communicative activities

4.3.1. Furniture arrangement

At the early phase of communicative activities, organizer's instructions and demonstrations must be carefully noticed by players, but the old styles of furniture arrangement in most high school stay helpless. It will be more convenient for game-participators if the desks are rearranged in new ways.



4.3.2. Seating arrangement

To arrange seat, size of class, group, sort of activity and kind of furniture should be seriously considered (Safa, 2009). In university English classes, moving furniture for pair and group work is regular thanks to seminar chairs and free-standing desks. Differently, high school furniture is bulky and established; hence, transferring performers from desk to desk is better. However, the problem is that moving players unavoidably cause noise,

disorder, and especially, takes a lot of time. A resourceful way for organizers is to compromise with tomorrow, your class will enjoy games; so, today, your sketch map of the class for the activity is unsurely delivered to the monitor.

a) Seating arrangement for pair work

Often, pair work is more favorite than group work in high schools as it is easier for organizers to arrange. Though, teachers can't put students in any way they like: back to back side by side or face to back. To see why, the important requirements involve students looking at each other and not seeing other's materials (Doff, 1988).

Actually, preceptors can choose other styles for pair work on provided that they go well with the activity and game violation is minimized. The arrangement of seating includes triangle style, café style, circle style, horseshoe style. Unquestionably, in university, seating arrangements for group work are diverse and easy for lecturers both to implement and supervise. Conversely, in high schools, teachers can't arrange their students in various styles at their direction. Even so, if desired, they can create suitable forms for their students to work in.

4.4. Choice of game and game topics

4.4.1. Game choice

Communicative activities are of many categories and in at different levels (Sovenda, 2010): very "controlled" for low learners, "less controlled" for pre-intermediate and intermediate one and "free" for upper-intermediate or advanced. Generally, high school pupils' levels are from pre-intermediate to intermediate. Ergo, free fluency-based games certainly challenge, depress and exhaust players; reversely, they may cause boredom. It is inferred that what is the most appropriate to our students is something between controlled and free practice –so-called "guided" or "less controlled" praxis. On the other hand, that the levels may be dissimilar from class to class, group to group requires the communicative activities utilize to examine the real ability of learners thoroughly. If your class is at lower levels, performers prefer "fluency games" limiting to more structured and shorter (Sovenda, 2010).

4.4.2. "Game topic" choice

Situation or topics should be within the experience of students as far as they could. Fairly, the close a topic is, the more facile it will be (Sovenda, 2010). Most students are ready to discuss weather, school, future plans, televisions programmers, vacations, pastimes, current events... Sometimes, "pretty" controlled role-play can offer "fantasy" curriculums, adding attraction and motivation to grammar lesson. In accordance with Sovenda (2010) always talking about real life can become very dull; so, it is tremendously enjoyed for part-takers to play different roles in imaginative contexts. Suitable roles for high-school classes should be everyday real-world people (e.g. parents, sisters, teachers, shopkeepers, ...) characters from school books and other sources like radio, daily papers, picture stories and so on. And suitable situations which the students see or take part in

everyday (Doff, 1988) may involve shopping, using public telephone, health, sickness, giving directions and such a like.

4.5. Monitoring

At setting-up stage, once students begin to converse, teachers – “facilitators” (Tugba, 2016)- quickly check if the students’ work is far beyond the demands or not to navigate their upset. Finding a couple of players bewildered with the game, teachers must “quietly” give instruments again to maintain the flow of the whole class. Even if the whole class go wrong, organizers need to stop players to restate what they are supposed to do (Rohmatillah, 2003). During task time, tutors can’t settle behind the desks but stand up so that all students can see them – advisors – to ask for help if necessary. Also, they can’t stick to one place very long; instead, they noiselessly go around monitoring the class, keeping key responsibilities in mind (Rohmatillah, 2003): helping some students hopelessly get stuck out; awakening all to curtail the mother tongue employment, private tasks, illegal look at each other’s materials and tactfully adjust biased participation. Exceptionally, giving players “approval” and “support”, whether satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily they work, is greatly requisite.

4.6. Limited time

A lesson span is so short that it has a tendency to break communicative activities, especially when all the learners are confused with what they should do. At the beginning of the course, it is a great idea to introduce communicative activities, “pair work and group work” to them completely. Besides, teachers may provide students with some helpful phrases which that are popularly used to speak and understand both teacher and peer speech such as: “Let’s start!”, “it’s your turn.”, “How do you say...in English?”, “I don’t understand. What do you say?”, “I have no idea.” And so on. Subsequently, to shorten the time for giving instructions later on, at the initial phase of the course, a list of common instructions needs displaying on the board.

4.7. Solutions to students’ reluctance and shyness in speaking

This problem is isolated from all above to solve since it is the trouble related to not only monitoring but also many other aspects.

4.7.1. Training students’ communicative strategies

At the beginning of the course, students should be supplied with communication strategies so that they can get over conversational obstacles by themselves (Youssef, 2011). The most fitting strategies for high school learners include paraphrasing, using the other tongue and miming.

a) Paraphrasing

When a difficult or unknown word is in the students’ mind, they can take advantages of many ways to paraphrase it. A wrong word with nearly similar meaning can be

exploited. For example, instead of uttering “colored marker/chalk”, a speaker can say “colored marker/chalk” or a new word can be made up to fill gaps (e.g. lady police, lady teacher...). Another way is focusing on characteristics or functions to describe an item unaware in English.

b) Using Vietnamese

The majority of communicative preceptors conceive that the first language should be prohibited during the process of activity. In fact, it is quite dull to do that since class interaction, without any use of the first language, will be so short and artificial. (Tugba, 2016). Due to the fact that students usually lack of vocabulary to express all they think in the target language, organizers are encouraged to allow the mother tongue in pair and group work. Of course, this employment is limited to some urgent cases: filling gaps, showing abstract and complicated words and explaining important things which can be hard to comprehend in the receptor language (Tugba, 2016).

c) Miming

In many communications a verbal message may be accompanied by a nonverbal one (Maria, 2015). Further, using gestures is not only authentic but also of assistance to crack unforeseen hindrances during interaction. As Tugba (2016) officially points out, body language and speech may convey the same opinion; and thereby sailing “stuck” conversations to proceed again unpretentiously. Students may, accordingly, use facial expressions to imply, maybe, the words they are at a loss to know (e.g. passionate, romantic, boastful...). To boot, nodding head, a sample of mine, may mean different thoughts (“I don’t think so” or let me think more” or “I don’t like it”). As a consequence, movements might ease or impair the speaking process, and learners with these worthwhile strategies definitely become more self-reliant to join communicative activities.

4.7.2. Clear instructions for games

To give effective instructions, preceptors had better employ simple language and short expressions at lower level than the language being tutored (Tugba, 2016). Outstandingly, the way of instructing must be consistent and firm. In the event of sophisticated instructions, teachers can write them on the board and, if desired, use visual or written clues to support them. In other circumstances, it is better for teachers to minimize their interpretation and then get students who have mastered the rules to explain them to those have not. The best procedure is that a lecture demonstrates the game. This illustration can be a whole class run-through.

4.7.3. Gentle treatment for errors

Traditional, teachers suppose that mistakes prove their students’ stupidity, laziness, carelessness or even lack of concentration on what are in hand. On the contrary, errors are seen as positive steps towards learning in communicative language classes (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). With time, correcting any mistake made by students is not supported

any longer, especially when students are practicing. During task time, if students are corrected all the time, they will feel vulnerable and unwilling to stay out their real feelings. Thus, to motivate students, “communicative activities” users can’t forget not to interrupt them, only secretly listening and noticing some common and important errors to deal with later. It is also prudent that teachers ought to encourage self-correction and peer correction by giving helpful prompts. Frankly, freedom from worry about mistakes will strongly diminish students’ shyness, worry and hesitation.

4.7.4. Relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for students

Classroom climate is vastly momentous, and it will considerably affect students’ work. To create an ideally relaxed and convenient atmosphere, lectures may, in the first place, develop a good relationship with their students. It is vital that there is no serious distance between teachers and students for fear of causing psychological factors such as nervousness, reluctance that distort message (Tin and Tuyen, 2000) and when weaken students’ interaction. To contribute to a productive working atmosphere, at the first meeting, teachers may ask students to write about themselves; characteristics, what they like to speak and so on. In class, teacher teachers need to be friendly and open to their students and crack class problems together. The teachers’ voice and speaking speed should be moderate. Moreover, patience and gentleness are preferred than hot temper and impatience.

5. Conclusions

It is undeniable that grammar is obviously one of three important aspects of English. However, it is the vital background for learners to develop their four main skills. Because of this, the authors choose grammar for our small study with the desire to contribute to the rapid development of English grammar teaching methodology. This research aims to evolve students’ ability to use structures to communicate freely and spontaneously in English. To achieve this target, the authors encourage the teachers of English whose purpose in teaching English grammar is to emphasize the role of the communicativeness of the utterances rather than memorization to use “communicative activities” in their grammar periods. Explicitly, as the title of the study implies, here is not a mere research on the problems in organizing “communicative games”, but a relatively complete guide to the ways to overcome them. Therefore, the authors believe that this study can lead high school teachers of English to success in using communicative activities in instructing structures.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Both authors strongly agreed on the publication of this paper and there was no contention or rivalry during finishing the work. In other words, the authors declare no conflicts of interests in this article. Both authors are fully and equally responsible for the benefits and harms after this article is published. The authors, moreover, declare that the material presented by us in this paper is our original work, and does not contain any materials taken from other copyrighted sources. Wherever such materials have been included, they have been clearly indented or/and identified by quotation marks and due and proper acknowledgements given by citing the source at appropriate places.

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