

UTILIZATION OF NEWS ARTICLES IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Most teachers teach grammar in EFL context as was recommended in textbooks with little relevance to the grammar employed in authentic texts. By focusing purely on form, meaning is neglected. This study was conducted with freshmen students from the ELT Department of Cukurova University in Turkey taking grammar classes by utilising articles from both American and British news sources. Instead of conventional textbooks as a main focus, participants chose their texts from such sources prior to scheduled classes, and during sessions, individuals worked on texts highlighting structural points in the syllabus. Later, they were administered an open-ended questionnaire eliciting their views about current experience. An interview was held to tally views expressed in writing. Both sets of data were analysed; common points identified, and elaborated on presenting detailed evolvment of this process. The study has implications to English grammar teaching in specific and teaching of grammar of other languages in general.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, contextualized grammar, news articles, authenticity

İNGİLİZCE DİLBİLGİSİ ÖĞRETİMİNDE HABER NİTELİKLİ MAKALE KULLANIMI

ÖZET

Yabancı dil öğretmenleri, dilbilgisi dersini özgün metinler içerisinde yer alan dilbilgisinden çok, ders kitaplarını temel alarak işlemektedir. Ders kitaplarındaki yapı odaklı anlatım, anlam ve akıcılığı ikinci plana itebilmektedir. İngiliz Dili Eğitimi programında yer alan birinci sınıf öğrencilerinden oluşan bu çalışmada, çoğunluğunu İngiliz ve Amerikan gazete haberlerinin oluşturduğu özgün metinlere dayalı dilbilgisi dersi işleyişi üzerinde durulacaktır. Bu çalışmada, katılımcılar, odak noktası olarak geleneksel ders kitaplarının yerine, dönem başında planlanan özgün kaynaklar içerisinde metinlerini seçip o dersin hedef yapısını bu metinler içerisinde bireysel olarak çalışmışlardır. Sonrasında, katılımcılara mevcut deneyimleri hakkındaki görüşlerini ortaya çıkarmayı hedefleyen açık uçlu bir anket verilmiş ve onlarla birebir görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Belirtilen iki veri kümesinin içerik analizi yapıp, ortak temalar çıkartılmıştır. Bulgular, İngilizce ve diğer yabancı dillerin dilbilgisi öğretimi çerçevesinde tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dilbilgisi öğretimi, bağlamsal dilbilgisi, gazete haberleri, özgünlük.

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Introduction

Grammar plays a pivotal role in teaching and learning languages. It is also one of the most difficult aspects of a language to teach. The word “grammar” brings to mind a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage. The kind of grammar in written texts and in formal presentations is classified as “standard” grammar, and the language used in everyday conversation is classified as a “non-standard” form. Language teachers who adopt this definition focus on grammar as a set of forms and rules. They teach grammar by explaining the forms and rules, and students do the (usually controlled) drilling. A deductive approach often fits into a lesson structure known as Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) (Ellis, 1994). The teacher presents the target language and then gives students the opportunity to practice it through controlled activities. The final stage of the lesson gives students the opportunity to practice the target language in freer activities which bring in other language elements. This results in bored and unsatisfied students who can produce correct forms on exercises and tests, but consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context.

The basic insight about language learning is that all naturalistic language learning takes place at discourse rather than at abstract sentence level as is in the PPP model (Celce-Murcia, 2002). Celce Murcia, in this respect, argues that the differing interpretations of one surface utterance means that knowing the literal and decontextualized meaning of an utterance is one part of the grammar, the other being the contextualized (pragmatic) knowledge of the utterance. Therefore, exposing language learners to authentic materials on various subjects can help them better understand the discourse of a target language as well as its culture.

Since integration of form and meaning is becoming increasingly important in current research, in the face of a growing desire for using authentic materials, it is essential that teachers, apart from sticking to the syllabus, incorporate authentic sources into their teaching of courses. Nunan and Miller (1995) define authentic materials as those which were not created or edited for use in the language classroom, but as those which are kept intact with no interference as they are presented to native speakers with no modification whatsoever to suit the needs of the language learners. They are used to imply the language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message (Morrow, 1977; Porter & Roberts, 1981; Nunan, 1988; Benson & Voller, 1997). This means that almost all everyday objects in the target language could be considered as authentic materials. In addition to informative function, authentic materials make an individual lesson more interesting and challenging, and keep students grounded in the reality of language; they help learners to see some personalities who communicate with each other via this language. As stated by Hinkel (2002, p. 195), “the contextualized teaching of grammar can expose learners to ways in which language is used in real life and heighten their awareness of its conventions and complexities”.

Making use of authentic materials is not only conducive to learning but also, in a sense, is a must. Given that there are sharp contrasts regarding vocabulary and grammatical features in grammar materials and the language used in the real world, the need to study

authentic materials in grammar becomes evident (Biber & Reppen, 2002). Authentic materials such as TV, newspapers or native speaker dialogues are all real language, not created with a purpose of language teaching in mind. Across the ESL/EFL world, calls for the use of “authentic” tasks, materials, and activities in language programs and courses are heard. While authenticity has many different interpretations, its wide appeal seems to be based on the concern felt by teachers that students pass courses by merely studying made-up English, and yet fail to communicate in English outside the classroom. However, the use of authentic materials is a substantial challenge for most curricula and many teachers since they often include vocabulary and grammar that are supposed to be too difficult for learners.

Integration of authentic materials into language learning has been the focus of some studies in the field. Musumeci (1997), while mentioning the idea of connecting form and meaning in grammar teaching, points out that students should be able to learn explicit grammar rules as well as have a chance to practice them in authentic or simulation tasks. Songs and jokes can be integrated into language learning since they serve as rather delightful and culturally rich resources in any grammar presentation and meaningful practice of structure.

In another study including authentic materials, Kitao (1995) suggests that a) newspapers use the actual language and carry wide variety of information so that anyone should be able to find something of interest, b) through English newspapers, learners get information about other countries, cultures and people, and c) learners can read articles about their country and understand how they are viewed in other countries. Such studies bear traces of Ausubel’s (1968) “meaningful learning” relating new knowledge to prior learning as a key concept of this theory. Instead of rote learning, which does not usually end in retention, and mostly is full of memorization, meaningful learning, on the other hand, aims to relate new material to present knowledge, and thus leads to retention. For example, if the goal is to teach forms, meanings and usages of tenses, rather than getting learners to memorize a body of facts and/or rules, the teacher could relate the lesson to authentic written discourse (which may be novels, stories, news articles, etc.) selected by learners themselves.

Last but not least, regarding advantages of authentic materials, thus it can be stated that by using such materials, learners are presented with actual everyday language, just as it appears in real life. Convinced by authenticity in an EFL environment, an individual based grammar course consisting of purely authentic materials retrieved from news articles by participants themselves was designed. While the process of course delivery is presented in detail below, following this process, the following questions were sought to answer:

- 1 What criteria do learners take into account while choosing texts?
- 2 What benefits do learners get from authentic texts in grammar courses?
- 3 Compared to traditional approaches of grammar lesson delivery, how do participants view this new approach of grammar teaching?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 100 freshman students at the ELT Department of University of Cukurova, who were all asked to analyze grammatical points they were supposed to cover in the syllabus designed for a grammar course. The participants, ranging from 18-19 years of age, had a fairly standard level of English due to a fairly standard university entrance exam they took prior to their placement in their present department.

Process

At the very beginning of the autumn term of 2009-2010 academic year, we began to implement our teaching of individual based grammar, following the steps below:

- 1 All the grammar points to be dealt with during the semester were decided on referring to the course book, *Rhetorical Grammar by Martha Kolln (2003)*
- 2 Based on these points, a syllabus was prepared and delivered to participants, who, in line with their preferences, brought texts retrieved from mainly American and British news sources such as *Time, Newsweek, The Independent, and Guardian*.
- 3 The teacher, first, started the class by putting a statement on the board referring to that day's topic without any grammar rule, and later asked participants to find and underline in their texts similar patterns to the *point* indicated on the board.
- 4 As a following step, the participants, in groups, discussed among themselves their underlined texts; by doing so, they were able to detect common characteristics of such texts.
- 5 Then, from each group, a student came to the board and wrote sample sentences emerging from members' preferences; in this way, all participants were able to observe targeted grammatical points expressed in different language with a different context and topics.
- 6 As a final step, the participants in groups produced oral and written language including the focal grammatical point of that class session.

While the participants went through the steps above, the teacher did also provide assistance in terms of jargon terms and culturally-loaded vocabulary concerning the grammar point(s) being dealt with in the news articles.

This process lasted for a full academic term with three hours of instruction a week. Following the coverage of all determined grammar topics, students, at the end of the term, were administered an open-ended essay type questionnaire, and were interviewed to find out about their views of grammar content, intelligibility, participation in the class, retention and enthusiasm for studying grammar.

Data Collection Tools

The data of this study was gathered by two techniques: administering an open-ended written questionnaire, and an in-depth interview.

Open-ended Questionnaire

With the three-item essay-type questionnaire (illustrated below), we aimed to highlight some perceptions and beliefs of language learners regarding studying grammar.

Item 1 sought the participants' criteria in choosing texts to study on. Preferences were aimed to be gathered out of this item. Item 2 was designed to detect perceived benefits of the texts selected by students themselves. Participants indicated their opinion about the contribution of articles they studied on in grammar courses. Item 3 was divided into 4 sections: (1 and 2) inquired about positive and negative aspects of participants' previous method in grammar classes, and (3 and 4) about positive and negative aspects of the current method. The following items were included both in the questionnaire and the interview:

- 1 What did you take into consideration while choosing the text you are expected to bring into class? (Text-choice *criteria*)
- 2 What were the *benefits* of the texts you dealt with in your grammar class?
- 3 Analyze your previous grammar learning methods, and cite their pros and cons. Compare those methods with the current one in your present grammar courses.

Interview

The interview, with a total duration of ≈ 420 mins, was performed in a one-to-one fashion one week following the administering of the questionnaire. The same items were inquired about with a focus on common themes for each related item. All emerging themes were later analyzed in terms of frequency of occurrence. During the interview, the following issues were taken into consideration.

- One question at a time was asked.
- The interviewer verified unclear responses.
- Students were asked open-ended questions.
- Leading questions were avoided, unbiased questions were preferred.
- Follow-ups and probes were used.

Data Analysis

Each response sheet was thoroughly examined; emerging themes in the questionnaire and the interview were categorized forming convergence topics. As a first step, for each re-emerging theme (time-of-mention=ToM), a frequency test was run utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. At a second stage, a chi-square test was run in order to identify any observable significant difference in the dispersion of overall themes for each item.

The common themes emerging from the analyzed data were presented in 6 tables, Table 1 reflecting text-choice criteria, 2 benefits obtained from news articles, 3-6 positive/negative aspects of both previous and current grammar teaching models. Below are presented the themes related to Item 1: text-choice criteria.

Table 1. *Students' Criteria In Choosing Texts (Item 1)*

Themes	Text-choice criteria	
	ToM	%
1 Text-related to grammar point	31	25.0
2 Raises curiosity	18	14.5
3 About current events	19	15.3
4 About own-society problems	4	3.2
5 About education	1	.8
6 About health	5	4.0
7 About technology	2	1.6
8 Informative	12	9.7
9 Includes comprehensible input	16	12.9
10 About arts	5	4.0
11 Authentic	1	.8
12 Improves knowledge of syntax	10	8.1
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)		0.000

The first item in the questionnaire given at the end of the semester aimed to detect students' criteria about newspaper articles they were expected to bring into class to study. For this item, 12 themes emerged in the participants' responses. It can be observed from Table I that Theme 1 emerged as most prominent by 25.0 per cent in both the open-ended questionnaire and the interview. Other themes emerged with differing percentages: the theme current events by 15.3 per cent, raising curiosity by 14.5 per cent, comprehensible input by 12.9 per cent, and the text being informative by 12 per cent. Below, are presented excerpts from the participants' verbatim:

I tried to focus on our grammar focus on our syllabus. (Theme 1)

I chose a text which interested me. (Theme 2)

I chose an article focusing on a current event. (Theme 3)

I chose an article which fit my language level. (Theme 9)

Regarding benefits obtained from the texts they selected, participants produced the themes in Table 2. From this table it can be clearly seen see that the texts were chosen for mainly three reasons: authenticity, form-meaning relation, and review of targeted structures. Other themes also emerged with varying frequencies.

Table 2. *Benefits Obtained From Texts (Item 2)*

Themes	Benefits from texts	
	ToM	%
1 Noticing structures easily	11	5.1
2 Being exposed to authentic use of language	41	18.9
3 Finding time to read for pleasure	4	1.8
4 Retrieving information	14	6.5
5 Reviewing targeted structures	34	15.7
6 Enhancing lexicon	11	5.1
7 Improving reading comprehension	3	1.4
8 Contributing to writing skills	3	1.4
9 Relating form to meaning	39	18.0

10 Building Schemata	18	8.3
11 Leading to long-term retention	15	6.9
12 Improving speaking	24	11.1
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)		0.000

For Item 2, 12 themes in total emerged in the participants' open-ended questionnaire and the interview. It can be observed from the table that students mostly benefited from texts since they were authentic, an indication that they wanted to use language naturally in a real context where they could broaden their horizon in a target language setting more effectively compared to course book materials where the language is probably artificial and information outdated. Theme #12, improving speaking by 11.1 per cent, was also found to be worth mentioning here. The following verbatim excerpts related to Item 2 are presented below:

I was able to see the grammar points in real context in a newspaper. (Theme 2)

Noticing grammar points in a real text was very enjoyable I had a great fun. (Theme 4)

The texts I chose made me review the topics better. (Theme 5)

The texts enabled me to remember the target structures longer than before. (Theme 11)

With Item 3, we aimed to investigate students' previous and current experiences regarding grammar learning. For this, students were expected to compare both experiences by focusing on positive and negative aspects of previous and current grammar presentation models. In Tables 3,4,5, and 6, the analysis of themes concerning this item have been illustrated.

Table 3. Positive Aspects Of Previous Experience (Item 3a)

Themes	Positive previous experience	
	ToM	%
Improves testing strategies	2	100.0

As can be observed in the table, only one theme emerged, that is improving testing strategy. This fact appears to depend on language testing policy matters in Turkey. Since students are obliged to take the YDS test (a university entrance exam for language students) at the end of their last year of High School education, students are expected to have covered all necessary grammatical points likely to appear in this test. Since this is the case, grammar classes focusing on pure structure of language seems inevitable for both language teachers and institutions. Following this approach, with emphasis placed on grammar, students are able to secure a place in a language department, which by them, is perceived as a positive characteristic. Following are verbatim excerpts from participants' responses:

I could bring my questions that I could not answer in my workbook and discuss with my teacher in the class.

Grammar classes include multiple choice tests and these may be useful for our YDS.

For Item 3b, with which we aimed to investigate negative aspects of participants' previous grammar learning models, 13 themes emerged with varying frequencies. These themes are tabulated in Table 4.

Table 4. *Negative Aspects of Previous Experience (Item 3b)*

Themes	Negative previous experience	
	ToM	%
1 Memorization	13	17.1
2 Easy to forget	6	7.9
3 Lack of world knowledge	2	2.6
4 Limited use of L2	3	3.9
5 Too detailed	1	1.3
6 Limited sources	10	13.2
7 Display examples	1	1.3
8 Lack of discipline	1	1.3
9 Too much repetition	8	10.5
10 Not current	7	9.2
11 Too much emphasis on rules	2	2.6
12 Boring	17	22.4
13 Minimized student involvement	5	6.6
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000	

From this table, it can be observed that Theme 12 emerged with the highest frequency. The students express that their previous grammar classes were monotonous and boring so they could not have any fun during class hours. Theme 1 appeared as next to highest with 17.1 per cent. Clearly, students were by no means pleased with pure memorization. Most indicated that rote learning provided them with no meaningful activities and nothing about their grammar courses was creative. Due to this fact, they stated that the information they received was easy to forget which was illustrated by Theme 2 (7.9 per cent). Excerpts from regarding this item are presented below:

Our teacher did not use target language she mostly used L1(Theme 4).

We got so bored in those classes in the past (Theme 12).

Our classes were teacher-centered. The teacher always spoke in the lesson (Theme 13).

As for their current experiences in the grammar course designed by the researcher, students stated both positive and negative aspects of the present model. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate the emerging themes regarding Item 3c.

Table 5. *Positive Aspects of Current Experience (Item 3c)*

Themes	Positive current experience	
	ToM	%
1 Comprehensible input	14	12.6
2 Long-term retention	8	7.2
3 Improves lexicon	7	6.3
4 Improves writing	1	.9
5 Raises consciousness	7	6.3
6 Increases L2 use	14	12.6
7 Builds schemata	16	14.4
8 Enhances research skills	9	8.1
9 Leads to creative language study	16	14.4
10 Provides review	4	3.6

11 Interesting	7	6.3
12 Maximises students involvement	7	6.3
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.000	

For this item, 12 themes emerged in the participants' responses. As seen from Table 5, the most positive themes concerning students' current experience are #7, (14.4per cent) and 9 (14.4per cent). Most positive aspect of this experience seems to be related to broadening students' horizon as well as leading to creative use of language; both potentially fostered by the utilization of authentic texts from newspapers articles. The texts selected, obviously enhanced students' world knowledge building and expanding their schemata. Other relatively highly emerging positive aspects of this current experience were illustrated by Themes 1 (12.6 per cent) and 6 (12.6 per cent), which were perceived to have provided "comprehensible input", and 'increased L2 use. Below are some remarks of the participants:

Different texts improve my lexicon and I can use more advanced vocabulary in my essays (Theme 3 and Theme 4).

This grammar model increases my language use English (Theme 6).

I have fun during my reading texts from the newspapers (Theme 11).

We are basically active in the class which is useful for us (Theme 12).

As for participants' views regarding Item 3d, contrary to 3c, only two themes were uttered by students. Thus, the current experience of authentic text material is not completely devoid of drawbacks. The themes and emergence frequencies are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6. *Negative Aspects of Current Experience (Item 3d)*

Themes	Negative current experience	
	ToM	%
1 Difficulty in text comprehension	2	33.3
2 Difficulty in finding an appropriate text	4	66.7
Chi-Square (Asymp. Sig)	0.414	

The table illustrates the fact that some students had difficulty in finding an appropriate text (66.7 per cent) and difficulty in text comprehension (33.3 per cent). Below are some verbatim remarks of the participants:

The texts were not easy to comprehend most of the time. (Theme 1)

Sometimes I had difficulty in finding an appropriate text. (Theme 2)

Despite the fact that authentic texts provide learners with a platform on which they can relate form to meaning enriching their world of knowledge by keeping them abreast with current events and realities in a continually globalizing world, understanding texts may at times, as was stated in Item 3d, constitute some difficulty of comprehension. This shortcoming should be regarded as an important limitation. It is here where the teacher in class should act in order to raise cultural awareness concerning terms and expressions which may have cultural and social attributes foreign to students.

Discussion

Unlike the traditional role of instructors which aimed to impart knowledge to receptive learners, opportunities for participants to make decisions regarding their learning process in grammar courses were tried to be provided. The proposed model was asking learners to determine their personal needs, and build appropriate learning situations to meet such needs without subjecting them to external controls or instructor-directed biases. In other words, the facilitator role for the teacher was advocated. The conditions for success in this model depend on the development of positive attitude about learning and the relevancy of the subject matter to personal needs rather than the actual subject matter mastery itself (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). Typical teachers' duty in the proposed model is much more different from that of traditional grammar teachers, in that it entails:

- Providing comprehensible input
- Facilitating peer interaction, item learning and pattern detection
- Providing output opportunities
- Motivating learners in establishing connection between form and meaning

It is clear that sentence-level grammar teaching cannot provide learners with a full picture of grammar. Therefore, it is necessary to take a broader approach and teach grammar in context.

Knowing about grammar is important for numerous reasons. It is the language that lets us talk about language. It names the type of words and word groups that comprise sentences in English and other languages. It helps with understanding what makes sentences and paragraphs clear, interesting, and precise. It lets us understand that all languages and all dialects follow grammatical patterns. This study has shown that teaching/learning grammar is best done within context of reading and studying authentic materials.

What we believe is that as practitioners, we continually need to redefine our role within the classroom, which can only be achieved by experimenting with different methods of teaching. We need to consider the needs and interests of the students' since there is no single best teaching method. It can be asserted every teaching model has something to offer and that what is most important is that teachers try to adapt or rewrite themselves again and again, for it is in rewriting that one finds that they have something new to say. For a teacher, to say and do something new or original has the potential to reflect on learners with the emergence of original ideas. During one's course of teaching, learners are likely to be observed to come up with innovative ways trying to realize such ideas. This is what we, as language instructors, do probably wish to see happen with our students.

Conclusion

Utilization of authentic texts in grammar teaching was greatly welcomed by English majoring university students. Most prominent benefits obtained from this model were expressed by the students to provide a platform where they are exposed to authenticity, relate form to meaning, review targeted structures, and improve their speaking. As positive aspects of this experience, they cited themes such as building schemata, leading to creative

use of language, and providing comprehensible input. Despite some comprehensibility difficulty due to some cultural elements they may embody, authentic texts are by all means an invaluable asset for both students and teachers since they provide a rich resource of language in an EFL setting, and this study does well supply evidence in this matter.

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