Applying pragmatic approach in EFL grammar instruction

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Abstract. The traditional linear approach to teaching grammar is insufficient for real-life communication where context plays a crucial role. Communicative grammar integrates language structures into the four skills of language, emphasising the importance of context and pragmatic usage. This enables learners to use and understand a structure in various situations spontaneously. The communicative approach to teaching grammar helps students express their ideas beyond just linguistic structures. This paper conducts a comprehensive literature review on the topic of communicative grammar in foreign language acquisition. It analyses different teaching methods and approaches to communicative grammar instruction, including linear and organic models, deductive and inductive approaches. The study also explores the benefits of integrating grammar instruction into all EFL class activities, instead of having a standalone grammar class. Additionally, the role of context and pragmatics in language learning and teaching is investigated. The relationship between form and function, as well as the importance of teaching grammar in context, are also analysed. The paper also examines the disadvantages of the traditional linear model of grammar instruction and the benefits of the communicative approach. It investigates the role of real-life interactions and constant practice in context for assimilating language structures and vocabulary. Finally, the cognitive motivational connection between language construction and meaning in communicative grammar instruction is discussed.

Keywords: communicative grammar, linear and organic models, deductive and inductive approaches, pragmatics, form and function, context, levels of description and explanation
The traditional method of studying the grammar of a foreign language has been through the linear model. This model entails gradually studying different grammatical aspects one by one, progressing from simpler to more complex levels [1, p. 101]. However, in real communication, grammar and context are closely related, and the appropriate grammatical choice can only be made by taking into account the context and purpose of communication [1, p. 102]. To communicate pragmatically in a second language, EFL users must consider both, the form and function and the context, including the relationship between speakers, their age, gender, social class, and status, conversational expectations and desired objectives [2, p. 12]. However, the benefits of teaching pragmatics are often underrated by teachers and underrepresented in educational materials [2, p. 12].

Communicative grammar, based on the communicative approach to teaching foreign languages, integrates language structures into the four skills of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, rather than teaching them in isolation [3]. The curricular reform experiment, described in the study by M. Y. Shaila and B. Trudell [4], highlights the benefits of integrating grammar instruction into all classes, instead of having a standalone grammar class [4, p. 2]. This approach helps learners who struggle to succeed in a university environment where they are expected to think, reason, communicate, and continue their learning outside of the classroom. During this curricular reform, students were encouraged to recognize grammar points in various language exercises and create rules instead of memorising them. The scholars supporting the communicative approach [1; 3] stress that grammatical patterns must not only be learned at the utterance level but also at the discourse level. For instance, the aforementioned curricular experiment also suggested teaching discourse conventions such as cohesion and coherence, as well as mechanics like spelling and punctuation, through integration into the lessons instead of being taught as a separate activity [4, p. 2-6]. The main objective of this approach is the development of communicative grammatical competence, enabling learners to use and understand a structure in various situations spontaneously [3].
Many foreign language programs and teaching materials follow a linear model of language acquisition, which assumes that learners acquire one target language item at a time, in a sequential order [1, p. 101]. However, an organic approach to language pedagogy, described by D. Nunan [1, p. 102], suggests that learners learn multiple things simultaneously and imperfectly. Scholars [1; 5] also differentiate between the following two methods of introducing grammar in class: deductive (rule-driven) and inductive (rule-discovery). The inductive approach is student-centred and allows learners to deduce grammatical items from the context, involving discovery techniques and critical thinking [5]. However, some grammar structures do not lend themselves to inductive teaching, and learners might arrive at an incorrect inference or produce an incorrect or incomplete rule [5]. The deductive approach, on the other hand, gets straight to the rule and saves time, as many rules can be simply explained, and the class can go on to implement the rules in practice [5]. When choosing the approach, the age and the level of the students, together with the cognitive style, learning strategy preferences, prior learning experiences, and cultural contexts should be considered [1; 5]. The deductive approach is used by many textbooks, where grammar is very often presented out of context and learners are given isolated sentences, which they are expected to internalise through exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation [5; 1, p. 102]. Unfortunately, some teachers frequently overestimate the role of memorising grammar rules and drilling the chunks [5] and, consequently, classes fail to make clear the relationship between form and function [1, p. 103].

Based on Cognitivism [6; 3, p. 180], communicative grammar goes beyond the manipulation of linguistic form and focuses on the social demands that an individual is exposed to [3, p. 186-187]. Language storage in the Cognitive approach involves integrating word-storage and conceptual stages. The former stores word forms while the latter forms concepts and images of words [3, p. 180]. Concepts are formed through real-life interactions, so learning activities must provide opportunities for constant practice in context to assimilate structures and vocabulary [3, p. 181].
One of the disadvantages of the traditional linear model is that grammar instruction teaches forms but not usage [1, p. 103], whereas the communicative approach helps students express their ideas beyond just linguistic structures [3, p. 174]. Instead, when teaching grammar by the communicative method, they often resort to the interpretation of the motivation of the meaning of the language construction. The motivational connection that exists between the meaning and form of linguistic constructions, given their cognitive and communicative basis, is at the centre of cognitive linguistics research. Within the framework of cognitivism, vocabulary, morphology and syntax are considered to be identical symbolic constructions of form and meaning [6; 7, p. 23-24]. Representatives of the Lexical Constructional Model (LCM) also consider the construction of meaning in the sense of a fixed form-meansing pair. Such constructions can be found at any significant formal level: from morphemes, words and phrases to supra-sentential units [8]. Thus, the LCM considers grammar as a list of constructions, distinguishing four broad levels of description and explanation for them [8]:

1. lexical and argument-structure patterns of constructions, e.g. “Later!” instead of “See you later”;
2. implicit constructions, generated by establishing a conventional connection between situational implicit meaning and a given linguistic form: “Leave me alone/ let me be”, which is not only a request from the speaker to leave him alone but may also indicate his tiredness or irritation (“Please, stop bothering me”); “Be my guest” as a call to action; or “Where’s my coat?” as an indication of the speaker's intention to end the meeting. Interpretation of implications at this level is provided by inference;
3. illocutionary constructions, interpreting of which provides access to high-level situational models: the clause “I’ve lost my pen” actually expresses a request “Could you, please, lend me a pen”;
4. discursive relations, embodied through inferential mechanisms (coherence) and constructional resources (cohesion): “It was a long trip and at 9 she was already asleep” instead of “It was a long trip, so she went to bed earlier this time”/ “She went to bed early because of the
long trip”. In such sentences with a cause-effect relationship, the discursive markers (so, because) reveal the implicit meaning.

This model is based on the methodical exploration of natural language expressions in their context of creation. It recognizes that language construction is not simply a combination of form and meaning, but a cognitive process that arises when speakers within a speech community create meaning in specific communication situations [8].

To effectively communicate in various situations with different people, learners should develop a range of practical situation-specific communication options[2, p. 12]. This is where the study of pragmatics comes in. Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in interactions. Native speakers naturally use appropriate interactions, while EFL learners must be aware of the linguistic and strategic options available in certain situations [2, p. 12]. These options include functions, also known as illocutionary acts, which imply a communicative purpose, and “the other aspects provide the social framework where participants of a communicative act interact” [3, p. 174].

To avoid being misunderstood or offending people, speakers must know when, where, and how to say things [3, p. 179]. J. Siegel suggests that EFL students can use the Speech Act Sets (SAS), while learning how to properly perform different functions, such as apologising, requesting, and thanking [2, p. 14]. These SASs include linguistic patterns, semantic formulas, and other options that allow speakers to communicate effectively [2, p. 14]. It is essential to provide informed instruction to students so that they know their options in various situations and can communicate effectively. Students must be given opportunities to express their ideas and opinions [3, p. 177]. A methodology that teaches learners how to form structures correctly and use them to communicate meaning is necessary [1, p. 103]. The teacher must provide communicative practice for students to achieve non-linguistic goals such as getting things done, socialising, asking for help or permission, obtaining goods and services, giving excuses, and expressing their personality through language [3, p. 174; 1, p. 103]. Failure
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and semi-controlled activities are designed to practise the form of the language and should be done right after presenting grammar [5]. These activities involve structured tasks to help learners practise specific aspects of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, without actually performing a speech act [3, p. 178]. They focus on accuracy, while free-practice activities focus on fluency and function [5]. To save time, theoretical explanations can be given in class, so that students can do the pre-communicative practice (matching, blank filling, question and answer exercises, comprehension questions, sentence formation, drills, and any other transformational exercise) at home [3, p. 178; 185]. Planning communicative activities (discussions, role-plays, games, performances, questions that require spontaneous interaction, stated situations, spontaneous conversations) is a more complex process and requires an appropriate situation and context to be selected so that they contain the structures under study [3, p. 177, 185]. For listening or reading activities to be considered communicative, they must involve a purpose or intention to be carried out. Learners have to read/listen with a purpose to perform a certain task afterwards [3, p. 177]. And for communicative writing activities, the notion of cohesion and coherence is of great importance [3, p. 177]. Adopting the communicative approach implies the adoption of a communicative syllabus, which is rather spiral and implies prior learning of grammatical structures and later practice with more complex variations [3, p. 173-185].

To encourage EFL students to learn grammar in a communicative way, it is worth highlighting that knowing different forms of grammar will allow them to express themselves more effectively. Different forms of grammar can be used to express sophisticated and extraordinary meanings, as well as personal attitudes towards certain events or situations [1, p. 103]. Grammar tasks that are designed with a focus on LCM level of description and explanation can contribute to a better understanding of the implicit meaning of language patterns of different levels. These tasks can also help students learn fixed expressions that are commonly used in everyday communication. For instance, the meaning of the modal verb clauses can be more fully revealed with the
help of the interpretation of illocutionary constructions from the third level of description and explanation. As for tasks at the fourth level, students can be offered the opportunity to independently establish an explicit meaning from syntactic patterns or to determine the type of general or specific semantic relations. They can also identify inferences and convey the cause–effect relationship with the help of discursive markers.

References: