

# **Using oral activities to teach grammar communicatively to first year non English major students at Vietnam University of Commerce = Việc sử dụng các hoạt động nói để dạy ngữ pháp theo đường hướng giao tiếp cho sinh viên năm thứ nhất không chuyên tiếng Anh trường Đại học Thương Mại. M.A Thesis Linguistics: 60 14 10 / Trần Thị Thu Hiền ; Supervisor : M.A. Nguyễn Thu Lê Hằng**

## **PART ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Rationale of the study**

Over the past few years, the application of the Communicative Language Teaching method has been widely adopted. This marked the beginning of a major change in the language teaching and learning at VCU. And students' grammar as well as communicative ability has been improved remarkably.

VCU Faculty of English has been newly established for 4 years. Almost all of the teachers were trained about CLT approach at the University and they fully understood the importance of communicative grammar lessons among students. Therefore, they made all their effort to apply many kinds of activities in grammar lessons to encourage students to communicate in studying grammar in classroom.

As a teacher in the Faculty of English at VCU, from my own observations and experience, I have noticed that there are many ways to motivate the first year non-major students in grammar lessons. Among them, the use of oral or speaking activities has been received

more emphasis. Nevertheless, both teachers and students have faced a lot of challenges in implementing and managing oral activities in grammar lessons. For example, the classroom is too noisy, teachers sometimes lose control of the class or students tend to switch to use their mother tongue when not under the teacher's eyes and so on. Moreover, the teachers' procedure in organizing speaking activities in grammar lessons is not very effective.

The above mentioned situation has urged me to conduct a study to investigate teachers' and students' difficulties in implementing oral activities, teachers' oral activities organization procedure, and teachers' strategies to foster students' English grammar. As a result, I have decided to carry out the research into *"Using oral activities to teach grammar communicatively for first year non English major students in Vietnam University of Commerce"*. This study is intended to make a modest contribution to an increased understanding of using oral activities in the grammar lesson at VCU.

## **2. Aims of the study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the reality of the use of speaking activities in the grammar lesson of 1<sup>st</sup> year students of Economics, Finance and Banking at VCU where the researcher is serving. More specifically, this study attempts to clarify the procedures of organizing speaking activities in the grammar lesson of 1<sup>st</sup> year non English major students and to identify strategies used by teachers to stimulate students' communicative competence in grammar learning and the factors bringing about difficulties for the teachers and students in their application of oral activities. One additional aim is to compare teachers' practice with students' expectation. Based on the findings, the research further seeks to suggest practical recommendations for the possibility of using speaking activities in grammar lessons of 1<sup>st</sup> year non English major students at VCU.

## **3. Scope of the study**

Though oral activities are usually applied in the speaking skill, I have chosen to focus on grammar lessons for the fact that grammar is the first thing that learners learn on the first day of an English lesson for non English major departments. Moreover, the purpose of studying English of English non English major students at VCU is to gain an international certificate in communication, for instance, the TOEIC test. Therefore, this research tends to investigate the use of oral activities in the grammar lesson. Also, due to the time

constraints, this study only involves a small number of VCU teachers and Economics, Finance and Banking students in their first year.

#### **4. Research questions**

In order to achieve the set goals, the research seeks to answer the following research questions:

- To what degree have oral activities been applied in teaching grammar communicatively to first year non English majors in Vietnam University of Commerce?
- What problems do teachers meet when using oral activities to teach grammar communicatively to first year non English major in VCU?
- What are the possible solutions to these problems as suggested by the teachers at VCU?

#### **5. Method of the study**

The main method of the study was survey questionnaire, in which two types of questionnaire are designed and distributed to the learners and the teachers. Furthermore, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the suggested approach, the writer collected some information based on her informal interviews to make sure that the data is more accurate and reliable.

A combination of different methods above will provide reliable data, based on which the conclusions and suggestions will be made in the next parts.

#### **6. Design of the study**

The study consists of three main parts:

The first part, Introduction, provides an overview of the study in which the reasons for choosing the study will be focused. It also includes the aim, research questions, research methods, scope and design of the study.

The second part, Development, consists of two chapters:

Chapter one, Literature Review, provides the theoretical background for the thesis. This chapter includes three main points. The first point deals with the general view on grammar and grammar teaching approaches. The second point discusses the problems. Finally, the third point discusses the need for applying oral activities to grammar teaching.

Chapter two, The Study, aims to describe background information about the current teaching and learning of grammar at VCU and presents the methodology underlying the

research including data collection instruments, procedures. A detailed data analysis and discussions are also given.

The last part, Conclusion, gives a summary and a recommendation for further study.

## **PART TWO: DEVELOPMENT**

### **CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter aims to explore a general view on grammar, grammar teaching in some English teaching approaches, problems in teaching grammar at VCU, and oral activities application to grammar teaching.

#### **1.1. Definitions of grammar**

In the foreign language teaching context, grammar is the first thing that learners learn on the first day of an English lesson. Grammar is often defined as the study of how words and their component parts combine to form sentences. However, that is only the way traditional grammarians see grammar. Other linguistic schools have their own definitions basing on their different interest. Structural linguistic might see grammar as the sum total of sentence patterns in which the words of a particular language are arranged. In addition, grammar is regarded as our innate knowledge of the structure of language by cognitive linguistics.

## **1.2. Roles of grammar in language teaching**

In the language teaching field, teaching and learning grammar is appreciated incorrectly and inexactly. Sometimes it is thought to be very boring because the teachers and learners always follow the old trace, that is, learning terminology, memorizing rules, doing mechanical exercises, such as sentence patterns and further practice. As Hopkins et al (1994: 157) assumes that it is boring to teach grammar but hardly any teachers ignore it completely. Grammarians do give strong support to grammar teaching. They think grammar gives us a means to understand a language. Besides, it reflects the order of the human thoughts and helps us to understand the diversity of human culture. For them, the acquisition of the grammatical system of a language remains the most important element in language teaching.

## **1.3. Approaches to grammar teaching**

In the history of language teaching methodology, it can be said that grammar goes closely together with the development of teaching methods and approaches. Grammar was once the focus of the earliest method – Grammar Translation and until now the tremendous change in methodology have always implied the changes in grammar teaching objective, techniques and activities. The following part is about some of the most common methods and approaches in which the grammar teaching will be concerned.

### **1.3.1. The Grammar – Translation Method**

This method is associated with the learning of Latin and Greek which was popular in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and considered to be the key to the thought and literature of a great and ancient civilization. The primary aim of this method is to engage the learners in mental gymnastics and to read literature and philosophy in the target language. Also, it focuses on grammatical rules, rote memorization of vocabulary and translation of literary texts.

### **1.3.2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

Towards the end of the 1960s there was a growing dissatisfaction among applied linguists and foreign language teachers with the language theories and teaching methods. The prominent American linguist Noam Chomsky had demonstrated that the current standard structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental

characteristic of language – the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. Besides, applied linguists emphasized a fundamental dimension of language that was inadequately addressed in approaches to language teaching at that time – the functional and communicative potential of language. Consequently, the teaching produced structurally competent students who were often communicatively incompetent. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as a response to that judgment. It is based on the language theory that language is for communication and the learning theory that real communication, meaningful task and meaningful language promote learning. The term CLT covers a variety of approaches that all focus on helping learners to communicate meaningfully in the target language.

### **1.3.3. Applying CLT to teaching grammar**

According to Siaw-Fong Chung (2005) since the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), many textbooks have been written to incorporate communicative activities, authentic materials and personalized contexts, but where the teaching and learning of grammar is concerned, most textbooks do not reflect CLT principles. Obviously, applying CLT to grammar teaching is necessary in order to deal with the disadvantages of Grammar Translation method when being used to teach grammar such as the learners' inappropriate utterances and passive learning style. The deep basis of this application is that CLT aims at developing communicative competence and grammatical competence is one of four of its component competences. Thus, in theory, CLT may be used to teach grammar so that understanding the rules of grammar is not an end in itself and learners are helped to recognize the communicative value of grammatical structures.

## **1.4. Oral activities**

### **1.4.1. Definition of oral activities**

A grammar lesson consists of different stages which are suggested differently by different methodologists. Ur (1996) organizes grammar teaching into four stages: presentation, isolation and explanation, practice and test, whereas according to Celce-Murcia and Hilles, a grammar lesson goes through four following phases: presentation, practice and testing. Thus, however different such suggestions are, practice as a stage is always present, it comes after the initial presentation and explanation when learners have taken knowledge into short term memory but have not really mastered it yet. Practice may be defined as any

kind of engaging with the language on the part of the learners, usually under the teachers' supervision, whose primary objective is to consolidate learning. Practice involves both spoken and written practice (Ur, 1996:11).

#### **1.4.2. The roles of using oral activities in grammar teaching**

Nunan (2007) agrees that oral grammar practice gives learners increasing opportunities and motivation to interact with other communicators, to raise their awareness of the forms and functions of English grammar. Grammatical patterns are matched to particular communicative meanings so learners can see connection between form and function. Learners learn how to choose the right pattern to express different communicative meanings. They will incorporate various grammatical structures in their performance. Students, for successful language use, need not only to be exposed to the structures and functions of communication but also to practice applying grammatical knowledge in real contexts. To reach the goals, the application of grammar in the classroom should be more creative and open-ended. Creative language activities provide more opportunities for the learners to use language more flexibility than receptive language tasks. Creative language use involves learners in recombining familiar words, phrases and structures in new and familiar ways. When students have enough time and enough opportunities communicate and to receive feedback on attempts at producing meaningful language, errors will gradually diminish (Corder, 1981; Selinker, 1972, 1992). Thanks to that students will learn grammar better.

#### **1.4.3. Characteristics of a successful oral activity**

According to Ur (1996: 120), a successful oral activity consists of the following characteristics:

- A lot of learners talk: learners speak as much as possible during the period of time allowed. Time taken up with the teacher talk or pauses is minimized.
- Even participation: every learner takes part in the speaking activity. The participants' contributions are fairly distributed.
- High motivation: The topic makes them interested and eager to speak or learners want to fulfill the task to get the goal.
- An acceptable language level: Learners use relevant and comprehensible expressions. Language accuracy is of an acceptable level.

#### **1.4.4. The selection of appropriate oral activities**

Many researchers discuss classroom activities and a lot of activities are adapted or designed based on the theory and characteristics of CLT.

Littlewood (1981) distinguishes between “functional communication activities” and “social interaction activities”. In his views, the former includes such tasks as learners noting similarities or differences in sets of pictures, discovering missing features in a map or picture, one learner communicating behind a screen to another learner and giving instructions on how to draw a picture or shape, or how to complete a map, following directions, and solving problems from shared cues. The latter includes conversation and discussion and sessions, dialogues and role-plays, simulations, and improvisations and debates.

- **Conversation**

Conversation serves many functions. People use conversations to establish relationships through personal expression, to find out information, and to compare views with others. Conversation provides a means for sharing experiences and solving problems.

- **Discussion**

Discussion differs from conversation in that it generally has an identifiable purpose, such as coming to a clearer understanding of characters’ roles in a drama or exploring the possibilities for publishing student writing. Discussion is similar to conversation with regard to listening carefully, considering what others say, being courteous, and speaking so that all can hear. Many of students’ conversational abilities will transfer to discussion situations.

- **Storytelling**

Storytelling is an oral sharing of a personal or traditional story, told using the essence of the tradition from which it originates. As a shared experience between teller and listener, it offers natural language experiences for students.

- **Oral reports**

In preparing reports, students develop the ability to select material appropriate to classroom topics and to the audience, and the ability to collect and organize material (requiring skill in reading critically, taking notes, summarizing and outlining). Often a report can be made more meaningful to the audience through the use of visuals such as charts, maps, diagrams, and overhead transparencies.

- **Telephoning**



The telephone is an important tool for personal, school, and business use because of the rapid communication it permits. Therefore, there is need to reinforce personal speaking and listening abilities regarding telephone use.

- **Announcements**

Making announcements can serve as useful oral speaking practice at any grade level. As with other types of speech activities, criteria for making announcements should be developed by the class. These criteria should address the recommended format and manner of presentation and serve as guidelines for the students.

- **Role play**

Role play provides the opportunity for students to develop and revise their understanding and perspectives by exploring thoughts and feelings of characters in given situations. The teacher may take a role, becoming an active participant in promoting independent thinking and co-operate learning.

- **Interviews**

An interview is a good way to gain information and provide the participants with practice in improving speaking and listening skills. Results of interviews can be prepared for publication in reports or in the school newspaper, thus supporting the writing component of the language arts program.

- **Informal Debate**

Students who participate in debates have an opportunity to explore, listen, and enjoy learning. Debates give students additional opportunities to hear their classmates' views and to express opinions regarding topics that matter to them. They also help students make important decisions and become critical listeners. The informal debate helps students to work together to understand common problems.

- **Co-operative learning**

Co-operative learning involves students in group collaboration in order to achieve a goal or to complete a project. Although students do not necessarily work together at one table throughout the project, participation by each group member is necessary to accomplish the task. Success and assessment are based on the performance of the group, as well as on individual contributions and performance within the group.

## **1.5. Conclusion**

Briefly, this chapter presents the literature related to the study. Not only the definition, the role of oral activities in grammar teaching as well as the characteristics of an oral activity, but Communicative Language Teaching approach and some other approaches are also viewed to figure out the most suitable techniques for effective English grammar lessons. Applying these techniques, the researcher wishes to discover how oral activities can help to teach grammar communicatively to the first year English non-major students in Vietnam University of Commerce.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE STUDY**

### **2.1. The research context**

The study was conducted at VCU where students come from all parts of Vietnam. The students experienced traditional method of English teaching at high schools and learning used to focus on reading and writing but not listening or speaking. Thus, they had very few chances to speak English. In fact, the first year non major students of English find the University learning style completely different and they find it difficult to join classroom activities. However, this study is carried out in the second semester when the students have passed the first semester and are quite familiar to communicative grammar. Moreover, they are active, enthusiastic and hard working in the study, which has encouraged the teachers of English to keep looking for way to help them improve their studying.

### **2.2. Methodology**

Nowadays, it is increasingly common for researchers to report the study on both quantitative and qualitative findings, especially, in studies on English Second Language (ESL) (Adams, Fujii & Mackey, 2005). Thus, in consideration of the research's purposes, this study was done in the light of both quantitative and qualitative research in which the data is collected by means of questionnaires and interviews of both teachers and students.

### **2.3. Participants and instruments**

#### **2.3.1. Participants**

The subjects of this study consist of two groups. The first group includes 150 first year students majoring in Economics and Finance & Banking. The other consists of 10 English teachers of Theoretical Department, English Faculty, VCU. The students age from 18 to 22, 54% are male and 46% are female. Some of them have learnt English for 6 years and the others for 3 years or fewer. Among the teachers, 4 have a Master degree, 3 are attending M.A. courses and 3 graduated from the University of Languages and International Studies of Vietnam National University. They all age from 24 to 40 and have at least 2 years teaching experience.

#### **2.3.2. Instruments**

##### **2.3.2.1. Questionnaires**

The study employs two questionnaires, one for teachers and the other for students.

The questionnaire for teachers, adapted from Mueller (1997), written in Vietnamese consisting of 4 questions was delivered to 10 teachers who were teaching English for the first year students at VCU. The questionnaire was used to explore information about their attitudes towards their degree of using oral activities, their difficulties in organizing oral activities during grammar lessons as well as the solutions they have applied when using these oral activities to teach grammar communicatively.

##### **2.3.2.2. Interviews**

Another research tool employed in this study was private interviews. The interviews with teachers were carried out (5 items for the teachers) to get more information about the difficulties they coped with when using oral activities in teaching grammar communicatively and some solutions they offered to deal with these difficulties. These questions were open enough to allow the interviewees to comfortably express their

thoughts, feelings or opinions. Before officially carrying out the interviews, the interview questions were piloted with one teacher to identify the potential problems.

#### **2.4. Procedure of data collection**

In the first phase, questionnaires were administered to 150 first year students in Economics and Finance & Banking at the end of the second semester of the academic year 2011. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire at home and returned their responses one week later so that they would have as much time as they needed.

#### **2.5. Results and discussion**

##### **2.5.1. Current situation of using oral activities to teach grammar communicatively to first year English non-majors in Vietnam University of Commerce**

The presented and analyzed data was taken from two questionnaires for both Teachers and Students at VCU and interviews for Teachers at VCU.

##### **2.5.2. Problems in using oral activities to teach grammar communicatively to first year English non-majors in Vietnam University of Commerce**

##### **2.5.3. Suggested solutions**

###### **2.5.3.1. Survey Questionnaires**

To improve the effectiveness of teaching grammar through oral activities, evaluation of oral activities was carried out by both students and teachers. Their evaluations are necessary in choosing, adapting and designing the oral activities.

###### **2.5.3.2. Interviews**

**Solutions to Problem 1: Limited time allowance**

**Solutions to Problem 2: Passive students**

**Solutions to Problem 3: Unqualified students**

**Solutions to Problem 4: Boring grammar course book**

**Solutions to Problem 5: Class management**

### **PART THREE: CONCLUSION**

#### **1. Summary of the study**

This research was presented with the aims to investigate the problems of using oral activities in teaching grammar communicatively. The research was based on the survey questionnaires and interviews.

#### **2. Implications**

With all the findings and discussions presented in the previous sections, this part will offer some suggestions for the teachers who are teaching grammar to English non-major students in Vietnamese University in general, and at VCU in particular.

### **3. Limitations of the study**

Due to the lack of time, the data was only collected through one main instrument, with questionnaire, supported by opinions gathered from short informal interviews with the teachers. Therefore the result of this study may only reflect a part of situation of using oral activities in teaching grammar communicatively. There are many things that need considering and investigating thoroughly. Mistakes and shortcomings are unavoidable so any comments or extra contributions are welcome.

### **4. Suggestions for further studies**

Using oral activities in teaching grammar still remains a wide room to study. Further research may focus on other subjects like high school students. As for a field of exploiting oral activities in learning and teaching grammar, the researcher would suggest that research on developing an item bank of oral activities for a particular textbook would contribute to deal with the shortage of applicable materials for teachers.