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Enhancing Grammar Competence using Glow@Cbi (Grammar Online Learning@Cbi)

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Abstract

At the heart of mastering a language, second language(L2) learners must be able to make sense of the function, meaning and structure of the language system that operates in the target language as to equip them with the language proficiency needed. Subsequently, this paper focuses on an alternative approach, known as GLOW@CBI to enhance learners' understanding of the grammatical tense and aspect of L2 English. Grounded by the theoretical principles of Vygotskian's mediation theory (1978) and Cognitive-grammar model (Radden & Dirven 2007), the strength of this approach lies in the representation of the grammar items using concepts, that are presented using various multimedia annotations to motivate and enhance learners' mastery of the L2. To explore the potential of GLOW@CBI as an alternative pedagogical solution, analysis of learners' pre-post-tests results and their views regarding the approach are investigated to ascertain the effectiveness of this pedagogical grammar approach. In essence, findings gained from the study evidently suggest that GLOW@CBI provides an alternative platform, especially to low proficiency learners who are otherwise easily distracted, to focus on their English language learning performance and hence enhance their mastery of the target language.

Keywords: Grammar, Concept-Based Instruction, Vygotsky

Introduction

At the heart of mastering a language, second language(L2) learners must be able to make sense of the function, meaning and structure of the language system that operates in the target language as to equip them with the language proficiency needed. Subsequently, the learning of an L2 language must include opportunities to discover and practise the language in order to internalise the structure and function of the target language to serve their L2 communicative purposes. Known as grammar teaching, it entails "any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it assists them either to understand it metalinguistically, and/or process it in comprehension and/or production, so that learners can internalise it" (Ellis, 2006, p.84). In other words, such teaching approach involves presenting the grammatical items by exposing

learners to the input as exemplars of the target structure, as well as providing the learners with corrective errors during communicative tasks (Ellis, 2006).

Despite the various approaches identified in implementing effective grammar teaching, at the heart of the teaching must allow opportunities for L2 learners to construct meaningful understanding of the specific grammatical forms in their communicative language activities (Niemeier and Reif, 2008, p.326). In other words, these L2 learners must be given the chance to '*develop a feel for the meanings conveyed by the components of the system*' (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.111).

Unlike traditional grammar approaches available, which focused on presenting learners with either explicit or implicit grammar rules, the value that is emphasised in Concept Based Instruction (CBI) is on the quality as well as the functionality of the grammar rules taught (Negueruela, 2008, p.201). In other words, the focus of CBI is not on mastering the structural aspects of the target language (i.e. the metalinguistic knowledge) but rather on affording learners with the in-depth understanding of the meaning potential represented by the grammar concepts for them to use in their communicative activities. CBI is based on three main principles, grammar concepts (1) a grammar concept is the minimal pedagogical unit; (2) a grammar concept must be materialised; and (3) a grammar concept must be verbalized in the form of either (self) explanation/other explanation at will then be transformed as a psychological tool for gaining regulation, i.e., control (Negueruela, 2008; Lapkin et al., 2008).

For the purpose of this study, the grammar concept identified, is on the tenses found in the English language (for further info refer to Harun et al 2017a). Briefly, the concept of tenses involves the inflection of verbs to mark the reference time distinction, such as that of the past time and the present time verbs (Comrie, 1985). Selection on these linguistic features is done due to the difficulties that the Malaysian L2 learners experienced, and documented in the literature (Lim, 2003, 2006; Wee et.al., 2010; Wong, 2012). For instance, L2 learners often do know the correct tense and aspect for a given verb (such as the use of [+ing'] for past continuous) but demonstrate some difficulties when using the forms to convey their intended meaning to serve their communicative purposes (Lim, 2006). For instance, Wee et al. (2010) conducted a study of the types and frequency errors committed by L2 English learners in their essay writing in their English for Academic class. Findings from the study reported that based on the analysis conducted from 350 essays collected, the L2 learners are found to commit 308 errors that consisted of four main types – errors-omission, misinformation, addition and ordering. Moreover, although these students who were undergoing a Diploma programme in Malaysia had undergone about 11 years of formal English classes at school level, findings revealed that many of these students still had difficulties to master the tense-aspect system of L2 English, and hence committed errors pertaining to omission of past tense forms '-ed' (13%) and progressive form '+ing'(8%), addition of '+ing' form (16%), and finally the use of wrong tense,(i.e. use of past tense over present tense) (4%). Subsequently, the findings indicate that these students have difficulties to make distinctions between the Malay and English tense-aspect marking systems.

GLOW@CBI (GRAMMAR ONLINE LEARNING@CBI)

FOR the purpose of this study, GLOW@CBI was constructed for learners of L2 English in the attempt to master the linguistic aspect of the target language and hence have the ability to use the correct grammar structure in their language tasks. While the language learning procedures are exclusively

designed based on Systemic Theoretical Instruction (STI) concept of mediation (Vygotsky, 1978) or also known as Concept Based Instruction approach, the strength of this grammar teaching approach lies in its' presentation of the semantic feature (meaning) of the language based on cognitive grammar as to uniquely enhance learners' mastery in constructing meaningful and appropriate structure of the English language. Thus, emphasis is given on not only the structural and functional approach of the language but also on the representation of the grammar items using concepts that are uniquely based on viewing every day actions or events through different 'viewing frames' (Radden and Dirven, 2007).

GLOW@CBI is a revolutionary approach that specifically focused on teaching and learning grammar tenses via online learning platform. Rather than emphasizing the traditional pedagogical grammar approach of learning that focuses on the structure and function of the grammar tenses (e.g. present and past tenses of English), GLOW@CBI utilises the use of concept learning that is presented via various multimedia annotations (video, and animation) to facilitate learners' cognitive process of learning the target tenses (Figure 1) (Harun et al., 2017b)

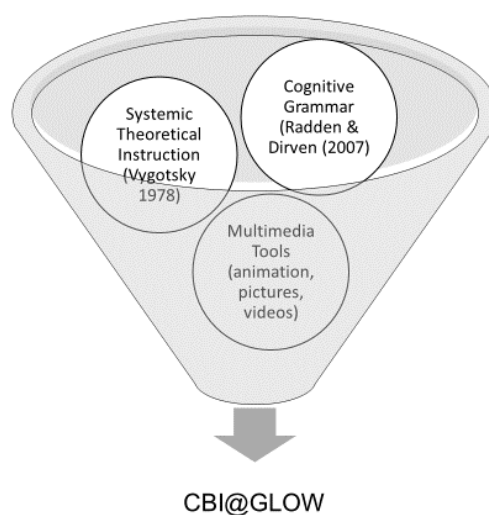
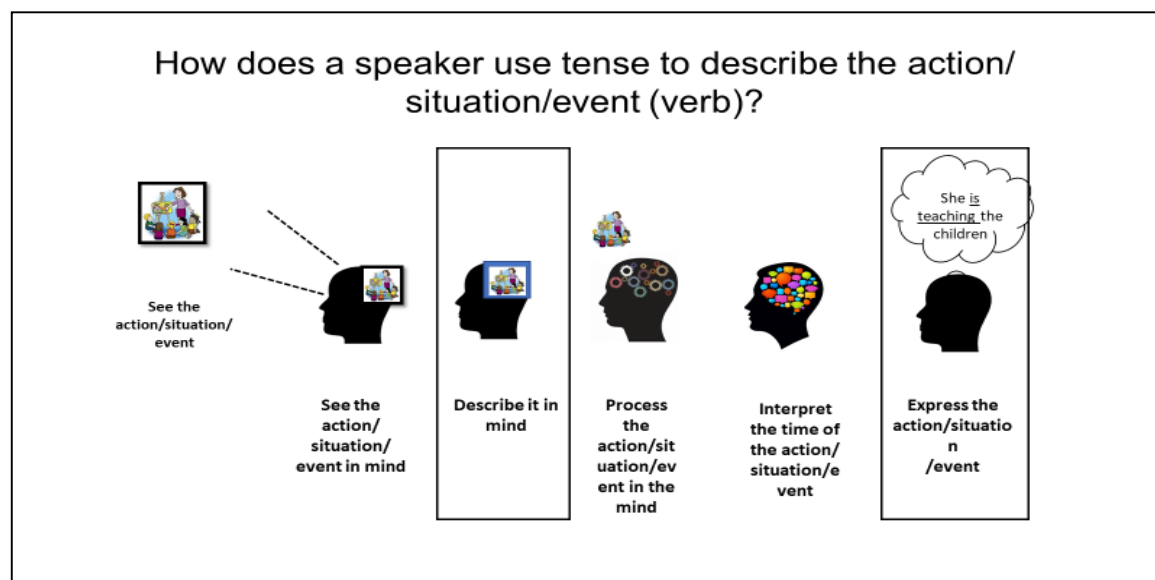


Figure 1. Features in CBI@GLOW

The uniqueness of GLOW@CBI is on the additional feature that has been missing in most traditional grammar teaching and learning approach (e.g. Audiolingual method, PPP method) that exclusively focus on the learning of the structure of a language, or other performance based grammar approach (e.g. Communicative language teaching, Task-based learning) that solely emphasised on developing language learners' communicative abilities to serve their communicative needs in various communicative contexts (Harun et al., 2017c). Instead, the focus of CBI is not only on the structural, and functional features of the language, but also that of the semantic feature (meaning) of the language (i.e. tenses) that is constructed and developed based on cognitive grammar as to uniquely enhance learners' mastery in constructing meaningful and appropriate structure of the English language (Figure 2).



As this study aims to identify the effectiveness of L2 learners' grammar competence using GLOW@CBI, the following research question is addressed:

RQ: Did GLOW@CBI help learners to improve their grammar knowledge on the specific tenses (Simple Present Tense, Present Continuous Tense, Simple Past Tense, Past Continuous Tense and Present Perfect Tense) learnt?

Methodology

Participants and Research Context

As the aim of GLOW@CBI is to facilitate and enhance L2 learners understanding of the English tenses, 260 first semester students whom were undergoing the General English Proficiency Course (GEP) were involved. These students were considered to be that of low proficiency to intermediate proficiency of mastery in English due the MUET (Malaysia University English Test) results that they obtained (Band 1 and Band 2). Accordingly, the particular subject was offered to these students to equip them with basic language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking and writing skills, with great emphasis given on grammar and vocabulary needed at the university level. As the students only attended a 2-hour session of class for the course, the teaching of grammar is normally embedded in the language skills taught, and further strengthen through the use of GLOW@CBI, that was conducted via the university's own learning management service platform known as GOALS (Harun et al., 2017b).

Data collection procedure

To identify the effectiveness of GLOW@CBI, data was collected for 7 weeks involving different phases:

Phase 1: Pre-test

Learners were required to answer a cloze-passage test consisting of 30 grammar items with reference to the tense-aspect in English (Simple Present Tense, Present Continuous Tense, Simple Past Tense,

Past Continuous Tense and Present Perfect Tense). The cloze-passage test was posted online, and learners were required to answer each item by typing their answers in the columns provided.

Phase 2-Intervention session - GLOW@CBI lessons.

This phase was conducted during Week 2 to Week 6 of the learners' academic term. No specific time was allocated for each lesson, rather they are allowed to work through the lessons that are made available online, at their own pace. Generally, the lessons comprised:

1. The Viewing Frames
2. The Present Tenses
 - a. Simple Present Tense
 - b. Present Continuous Tense
3. The Past Tenses
 - a. Simple Present Tense
 - b. Present Continuous Tense
 - c. Present Perfect Tense

Phase 3 – Post-test sessions

Learners were required to answer again the cloze-passage test that tested their understanding on the tense-aspect feature selected during week 7. Similarly, as it was an online test, learners were required to answer each item by typing their answers in the columns provided. Attempts given to answer each item were restricted to only one time. However, the learners were able to view their scores along with the explanation for each wrong answer given at the end of the test, in order for them to ascertain the progress made.

Findings

The data was quantitatively analysed to ascertain the effectiveness of GLOW@CBI in enhancing their understanding of the selected grammar items. Analysis of the t-test using the SPSS package was performed to identify whether learners improved/not improved their understanding in the grammar tense-aspect knowledge following the intervention session of GLOW@CBI. Findings from the t-test revealed that there was a significant difference in learners' knowledge of the grammatical tenses, with the difference of the independent t-test being significant $t(25) = -6.901, p < 0.0001$.

Table 1. Pre and Post test results

		Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
All result	Equal variances assumed	25.150	.000	-6.901	258	.000	-13.69231	1.98396
	Equal variances not assumed			-6.901	205.520	.000	-13.69231	1.98396

As it is the ultimate goal for any pedagogical grammar to enhance learners' awareness of how they can use language to convey their meanings and communicative needs, hence the materials and approaches to teaching grammar in the second language classroom should then be aimed at creating learners' awareness of such meanings implied through the various linguistic choices available to them. Based on the results, the findings of the t-test significantly illustrate that the grammar lessons conducted via GLOW@CBI which emphasised the use of analogical presentation of grammar tenses using viewing frames that also emphasised on the semantic feature of each grammar items had provided learners with an in-depth understanding of the selected grammar items. This may be due to the fact that GLOW@CBI emphasises more in helping the learners comprehend the meaning potential presented by the grammatical concept and hence have the ability not only to discern but also to 'manipulate concepts to serve their communicative needs' (Negueruela 2008, p.211). Subsequently, the learners were able to perform independently in using the required concepts due to their ability to transfer the relevant concepts to the necessary language contexts as demanded.

Conclusion

In learning a language, grammar knowledge is a fundamental basic knowledge that needs to be built for the learners in ensuring that the learners successfully perform other language skills (e.g. speaking, listening, writing and reading) in their language classes. Importantly, learners need to have a strong and comprehensive understanding of grammar knowledge in learning a target language by building the appropriate grammar concepts or blocks will help to set a foundation for effective communicative competencies. An evident pedagogical implication resulted from this study is that it is crucial that the design of any L2 pedagogy grammar approach to consider teaching the grammatical concept by retaining its full meaning, which encompasses not only the metalinguistic or structural information, but also its semantic and functional aspect.

Subsequently, GLOW@CBI may offer an alternative language teaching approach for the learners to explore and acquire the linguistic feature (i.e.grammar) of the language, especially those of the low proficiency learners. This is because, unlike other traditional grammar approaches that emphasised explicit grammar teaching that emphasises on the amount of attention and frequency on the formal structures of the language, or on the learners' communicative performance to achieve L2 language mastery, GLOW@CBI allows learners the ability to make connections between the pieces of information presented on the target concepts, which they did not appear to have been aware of in the initial stage of the study. Importantly, GLOW@CBI not only facilitate and promote understanding and control of the linguistic concept, but also allows for opportunities to gain insights on the different ways to manipulate the concept to serve their communicative needs. Subsequently, by providing learners the appropriate grammar learning experience, they are able to transform their learning experience to become more meaningful and effective.

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