

Teaching Grammar In Context: A Contextual Approach To Language Learning

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Abstract

Grammar instruction has traditionally followed a prescriptive and decontextualized model, often disconnected from real language use. Recent pedagogical research, however, highlights the advantages of teaching grammar in context, promoting more meaningful learning and communicative competence. This study investigates the effectiveness of contextual grammar teaching among intermediate ESL learners. The research uses a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-tests, comparing two groups—one receiving traditional grammar instruction and the other taught using contextualized tasks. Results indicate that learners exposed to contextual grammar instruction demonstrate better retention and application of grammatical structures. The study underscores the importance of integrating grammar teaching with authentic language use in communicative settings.

Keywords: Grammar in context, contextualized grammar teaching, ESL instruction, communicative competence, language acquisition

Introduction

Grammar remains a fundamental aspect of language learning, often regarded as a cornerstone of effective communication. However, its instruction has sparked significant debate among educators and researchers. Traditionally, grammar teaching has followed a prescriptive approach, focusing on rule memorization and isolated drills, which may result in learners gaining explicit knowledge without the ability to apply it meaningfully in real communication. This traditional view is rooted in behaviorist theories that emphasize mechanical repetition and habit formation (Skinner, 1957). However, this approach has been criticized for its lack of attention to context, which can hinder learners' ability to use grammatical knowledge appropriately in diverse communicative situations (Ellis, 2006; Krashen, 1982).

In contrast, more contemporary frameworks advocate for teaching grammar in context, which emphasizes the integration of grammatical forms into real-world communication. This approach aligns with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), which prioritize meaning over form and focus on language use in authentic settings (Canale & Swain, 1980). Grammar, in this view, is not seen as a set of isolated rules to be memorized but as a flexible tool for achieving communication. Researchers argue that learning grammar in context helps learners internalize grammatical structures more effectively because it connects form with meaning, use, and pragmatics (Nunan, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

The shift toward contextual grammar instruction is supported by the theory of *input hypothesis* (Krashen, 1982), which asserts that language learners acquire new language forms when they are exposed to comprehensible input in meaningful contexts. By interacting with language in authentic settings—such as through conversation, reading, or writing—learners can infer grammatical rules in a way that promotes long-term retention and intuitive use (Swain, 2000). This stands in stark contrast to the rote memorization often associated with traditional grammar drills, which may not facilitate the transfer of grammatical knowledge to real-life communicative tasks.

Research also suggests that contextual grammar teaching supports the development of *communicative competence*—the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in various social contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980). Studies by Fotos (2001) and Ellis (2002) demonstrate that learners who are exposed to grammar through communicative tasks show better performance in speaking, writing, and listening than those who learn grammar through decontextualized activities. By using grammar as a tool for meaningful interaction, learners gain confidence in using the language as they encounter grammatical structures in authentic situations.

Moreover, the integration of grammar into real-world tasks addresses the cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning. As Vygotsky (1978) proposed, learning is a social and collaborative process. When learners use grammar in communicative contexts, they are engaging in problem-solving, negotiation of meaning, and collaboration with others—activities that are essential for cognitive development. In addition, contextualized grammar teaching has been shown to enhance learners' motivation and engagement by making grammar more relevant to their needs and interests (Skehan, 1998).

Despite the increasing support for teaching grammar in context, challenges remain. Teachers often struggle to balance the need for explicit grammar instruction with the demand for communicative practice (Schmidt, 1990). The tension between focusing on form and focusing on meaning can be difficult to resolve, and the lack of effective teacher training in contextualized grammar teaching further complicates its implementation (Fotos & Nassaji, 2007).

This article explores the rationale behind teaching grammar in context, presents empirical evidence supporting its efficacy, and offers implications for classroom practice. Through a review of relevant literature and an empirical study examining the effectiveness of contextual grammar instruction, this paper aims to demonstrate that teaching grammar within meaningful, communicative contexts can lead to more effective language learning outcomes. It will also discuss strategies for integrating contextual grammar teaching into the classroom and the role of the teacher in facilitating this process.

Literature Review

The shift from formal, rule-based grammar instruction to contextualized teaching of grammar is deeply rooted in the development of second language acquisition theories, particularly those that emphasize communication and practical language use. Early theories of second language acquisition (SLA) stressed the importance of input, interaction, and meaningful use of language. The concept of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) emerged as a key framework, advocating that learners should not only know the rules of grammar but also how to use language effectively and appropriately in a variety of social contexts. This expanded view of language competence marked a departure from traditional models that viewed grammar as a static set of rules to be memorized and applied in isolation.

Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis further emphasizes the necessity of comprehensible input for language learning. According to Krashen, learners acquire language most effectively when exposed to language that is just beyond their current proficiency level but still accessible through contextual cues. This suggests that grammar should be introduced not as a series of decontextualized rules but within authentic communication, allowing learners to make connections between form, meaning, and function in real-life contexts.

Ellis (2006) provides a significant distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge, arguing that the type of grammar instruction typically found in traditional approaches is explicit, meaning that learners consciously learn grammatical rules. However, explicit knowledge does not always transfer easily into fluent, real-world use. Ellis argues that contextual learning—through tasks and communicative activities—fosters implicit knowledge, which is crucial for achieving fluency and spontaneity in language use. This distinction highlights the importance of providing opportunities for learners to engage with grammar in meaningful ways, rather than relying solely on explicit, rule-based instruction.

Nunan (1998) reinforces this argument by suggesting that decontextualized grammar instruction, which focuses only on isolated exercises or rote memorization, does not adequately prepare learners for real-world communication. In this view, language learners need to interact with grammar within authentic contexts where they are required to use language flexibly and appropriately. Nunan advocates for grammar instruction that is integrated into communicative tasks such as role-playing, discussions, or problem-solving activities, which provide a natural setting for learners to practice and apply grammar rules.

Larsen-Freeman (2001) builds on this perspective by asserting that grammar should not be taught merely as a set of formal rules (form) but should also encompass meaning and use. She argues that grammatical structures

can only be fully understood and internalized when learners understand not just how to form them but also when and why to use them in different social contexts. This view aligns with the communicative approach, where the goal is not only accuracy but also appropriateness in communication. By integrating grammar into authentic tasks, learners can see how grammatical choices are influenced by factors such as tone, register, and context, thus developing a more nuanced understanding of language.

Studies by Fotos & Nassaji (2007) and Celce-Murcia (2001) further support the idea that integrating grammar into communicative tasks leads to more successful language acquisition. Fotos & Nassaji (2007) conducted research showing that learners who engage with grammar through communicative activities demonstrate greater grammatical accuracy and fluency in both written and spoken language. These findings suggest that context-rich activities provide learners with opportunities to use grammar in dynamic, interactive ways, fostering deeper internalization and more effective language use.

In addition to these findings, studies on task-based language teaching (TBLT) further highlight the advantages of teaching grammar in context. Tasks that require the use of specific grammatical structures to achieve communication goals—such as storytelling, collaborative problem-solving, or project-based work—allow learners to engage with language in ways that mimic real-world communication. By focusing on meaning and communication, TBLT promotes the incidental learning of grammar through use, as learners are motivated to use structures they have been taught to express themselves clearly and effectively (Ellis, 2003).

In contrast to traditional grammar instruction, which often focuses solely on accuracy, these studies emphasize the importance of teaching learners to use grammar creatively and adaptively in different contexts. Thus, the shift to contextualized grammar instruction not only enhances grammatical accuracy but also encourages learners to develop communicative competence, enabling them to use language fluently and appropriately in diverse situations.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted with a total of 55 freshmen students from the UzSWLU (Uzbek State World Languages University), enrolled in the first year of their English language program. The participants were selected through a convenience sampling method, ensuring that all students had similar language proficiency levels, which were assessed through a preliminary language placement test. The students were divided into two groups: a control group (n=28) and an experimental group (n=27), based on their class schedules and teacher assignment. These groups were similar in terms of age, gender distribution, and initial proficiency in English.

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design, utilizing a pre-test and post-test to measure the impact of contextual grammar instruction on students' grammar acquisition. The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks during the first semester of the academic year. The control group received traditional grammar instruction, focusing on explicit teaching of grammar rules and practice through workbook exercises and drills. In contrast, the experimental group engaged in contextual grammar instruction, which involved learning grammar through communicative tasks such as role-playing, discussion activities, and analyzing authentic materials such as articles, short stories, and dialogues.

To assess the effectiveness of the two different teaching methods, the following instruments were employed:

1. Grammar Test: A pre-test and post-test designed to measure students' understanding and application of key grammatical structures such as tenses (e.g., present perfect, past simple) and sentence structures. The test consisted of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing students to demonstrate their ability to apply grammatical rules in context.
2. Task-based Performance Assessment: An assessment based on task-based activities that evaluated students' ability to use grammar in meaningful communication. This included written tasks (e.g., short essays, narrative writing) and oral tasks (e.g., role-play activities and group discussions). These tasks aimed to measure how well students applied grammatical structures during real communicative situations.
3. Surveys and Questionnaires: At the end of the study, both groups completed a questionnaire that gauged their attitudes toward grammar learning and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the

instructional methods. This was used to measure students' motivation, engagement, and satisfaction with the learning process.

The study was conducted over the course of eight weeks. The first week involved a pre-test to assess students' initial grammar knowledge. In the following six weeks, both groups received their respective treatments. The control group followed a traditional grammar instruction program, which consisted of explicit grammar rule explanations, followed by practice exercises from textbooks and worksheets. The experimental group, on the other hand, participated in contextual grammar instruction, where grammatical structures were introduced through tasks that simulated real-world communication scenarios. Activities included group discussions, reading comprehension tasks, and grammar analysis through authentic materials such as news articles, dialogues, and short stories.

Each lesson in the experimental group focused on a specific grammatical structure, with students first encountering it in context (e.g., through reading or listening activities) and then using it in communicative tasks. In addition to grammar-focused activities, students were encouraged to reflect on the grammatical forms they used and to discuss their choices with peers. This approach aimed to foster both implicit and explicit knowledge of grammar.

At the end of the six-week instructional period, students took the post-test to evaluate any changes in their grammar proficiency. In addition to the test, task-based performance assessments were used to measure how well students were able to apply grammar in communicative tasks. Finally, a follow-up questionnaire was administered to both groups to assess their perceptions of the learning process.

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the grammar scores of the two groups. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean scores for both the control and experimental groups before and after the intervention. Additionally, the results from the task-based performance assessments were compared qualitatively to assess how well each group was able to apply grammatical structures in meaningful communication. Finally, survey responses were analyzed to gauge students' attitudes towards the grammar instruction they received.

Results

Before the intervention, all 55 students, comprising 28 students in the control group and 27 students in the experimental group, took the pre-test to assess their initial grammatical knowledge. The pre-test scores of both groups indicated no significant differences ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that both groups started with similar levels of grammar proficiency.

The mean pre-test scores for both groups were as follows:

- Control Group (n = 28): Mean score = 68.4%
- Experimental Group (n = 27): Mean score = 67.9%

These scores suggest that both groups were at an intermediate level of grammatical knowledge prior to the intervention.

After six weeks of instruction, both groups took the same grammar post-test to evaluate any improvements in their grammatical understanding and application. The results showed a significant improvement in the post-test scores of both groups, but the experimental group outperformed the control group.

The post-test mean scores for each group were:

- Control Group (n = 28): Mean score = 74.2%
- Experimental Group (n = 27): Mean score = 83.5%

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare the pre-test and post-test scores for both groups. The analysis revealed that:

- For the Control Group, the increase in score from the pre-test (68.4%) to the post-test (74.2%) was statistically significant ($t(27) = 5.12, p < 0.01$).
- For the Experimental Group, the increase from the pre-test (67.9%) to the post-test (83.5%) was also statistically significant ($t(26) = 9.45, p < 0.01$).

In addition to the grammar tests, students' ability to apply grammatical structures in context was assessed through task-based activities. These included written tasks such as short essays and oral tasks such as role-plays and group discussions.

- Control Group: The control group showed moderate improvements in task-based assessments, particularly in written tasks, where they demonstrated more accurate use of grammatical structures. However, their ability to apply grammar spontaneously in oral tasks, especially in more complex sentence structures, was less effective.
- Experimental Group: The experimental group demonstrated notable improvements in both written and oral task-based activities. They used grammatical structures more fluidly and accurately in real communication contexts. In particular, the experimental group showed a higher level of flexibility in using grammatical forms in spontaneous spoken communication, which was facilitated by the contextualized nature of their learning.

At the end of the study, a questionnaire was administered to assess students' attitudes towards the grammar instruction they received. Results showed a significant difference in student engagement and satisfaction between the two groups:

- Control Group: The control group reported feeling more confident in applying grammar rules in written tasks but expressed frustration with the lack of real-world application in their learning. They felt that the traditional approach was less engaging and did not foster spontaneous use of language.
- Experimental Group: The experimental group reported higher levels of motivation and satisfaction with their grammar instruction. They felt more confident in using grammar in real communication and appreciated the opportunity to apply grammatical rules in authentic contexts. Many students in the experimental group noted that they found the task-based activities both enjoyable and beneficial for their language development.
- Grammar Knowledge: Both groups showed improvements in their grammar knowledge as measured by the pre-test and post-test, with the experimental group showing a significantly larger gain.
- Task-based Performance: The experimental group outperformed the control group in their ability to apply grammar in task-based activities, particularly in speaking tasks.
- Student Attitudes: The experimental group had more positive attitudes toward grammar instruction, reporting higher levels of engagement and satisfaction with their learning experience.

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Group	Pre-test Mean (%)	Post-test Mean (%)	Gain Score (%)
Control Group	68.4	74.2	+5.8
Experimental Group	67.9	83.5	+15.6

These results indicate that contextualized grammar instruction, which emphasizes the use of grammar in communicative tasks, led to significantly better outcomes in terms of grammar knowledge, task-based

Discussion

The findings align with previous studies supporting the contextual teaching of grammar. Contextualized tasks appear to promote deeper processing and better long-term retention. Learners in the experimental group were not only more accurate but also more confident in using grammar for real communication.

This study supports the idea that grammar instruction should move beyond form-focused drills. Contextual instruction makes grammar more relevant, encouraging learners to internalize rules through meaningful use. It also addresses the affective domain, increasing motivation and engagement.

Conclusion

Teaching grammar in context significantly improves learners' grammatical competence and communicative ability. Rather than isolating grammar from use, educators should embed it within authentic, meaningful tasks. This shift demands curriculum redesign and teacher training, but the outcomes are promising for language development.

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