

Challenges for Methodological Designs and Proposed Alternative Instruction for Teaching English Grammar to Thai Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students

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Abstract

Grammar is a foundation of language, as all languages consist of rules and usage. Learning English grammar is challenging for Thai EFL learners because of the contrastive grammatical features between Thai and English. Learning English grammar is even more difficult for Thai deaf and hard-of-hearing students since they have limited tools and cues for acquiring English grammar. This paper discusses possible challenges in teaching English grammar to deaf and hard-of-hearing students and reviews some teaching methodologies that might be effective for deaf and hard-of-hearing Thai EFL students. The authors also introduce the WebQuest instruction as a promising alternative instruction of English grammar for this group of students.

Keywords: English grammar, EFL, deaf students, WebQuest

1. Introduction

Grammar is one of the most prominent aspects of languages, serving as a foundation of the language. All languages consist of unique grammatical rules and usage. Therefore, learning about grammar is about how the language functions and how language learners can apply rules in actual uses. Teaching grammar to students is complicated but teaching it to deaf and hard-of-hearing students is much more challenging. This article aims to 1) explore some challenges in teaching English grammar to deaf and hard-of-hearing students, 2) review some teaching methodologies and their effectiveness in teaching English grammar to deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and 3) propose an alternative English grammar instruction to deaf and hard-of-hearing students in Thailand. This review article could be a reference for further instructional development in language education for the deaf in Thailand.

2. Definitions of Grammatical Competence

Definitions and scopes of grammatical competence vary among linguistics under different paradigms. Linguists under the innatism umbrella, such as Chomsky (1959, as cited in Harmer, 2015), view grammatical competence as innate linguistic ability, which is biologically programmed and known as Universal Grammar (UG). Chomsky believes it is innately equipped with some sort of Language Learning Device (LAD), facilitating the acquisition of a first language (L1). Grammatical competence can be manifested through observable actions (grammatical performance). Errors made by language users indicate problems in their grammatical competence. Therefore, grammatical performance reflects how competent language learners are.

In contrast to Chomsky's ideology in innatism, communication-oriented linguists such as Canale and Swain (1980) consider grammatical competence as an element of communicative competence. According to Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence framework, there are three distinct aspects accountable for communicative achievement: 1) grammatical competence (knowledge about vocabulary, morphemes, syntax, semantics, and phonology); 2) sociolinguistic competence (ability to use language in social interaction); and 3) strategic competence (applications of communicative strategies to successfully convey and receive messages). Later, Canale (1983) included discourse competence (skills for creating coherent/cohesive language for different situations). In conclusion, they believe that grammatical competence is the foundation of overall communication.

Alternatively, Larsen-Freeman (2003) proposed the Three-Dimensional Grammar Model concept, stating that grammatical competence lies in the knowledge of grammatical form, meaning, and use. First, grammar form refers to phonological and morphosyntactic features. Second, grammar meaning indicates semantic competence. Lastly, grammar use reflects learners' pragmatic and discourse competences. These three aspects of grammatical competence interrelate with each other, creating a complex language system. This model is based on a Complexity Theory where social interactions and language uses in different situations are essential for language learners' development. It could be concluded that this definition of grammatical competence greatly refers to the complexity of language and discourse diversity.

3. Significance of Grammar

Learning and *acquiring* grammatical competence are theoretically different. According to the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 106), *acquiring* refers to the unconscious, spontaneous, and natural processes of profound understanding of language. It might be closely related to how one naturally learns their first language (L1). On the other hand, *learning* language requires conscious efforts about rules of language (grammar) through explicit means of instruction. Learning is particularly required for those who learn a second language (L2), which consists of different rules and uses from their L1. Learning about grammatical rules and uses are key determinants of communicative competence. Regarding the language background of learners, those whose English is not a native language need to develop their grammatical knowledge to some extent to achieve a certain level of communication achievement.

Grammatical competence is one of 4 competences that determine an overall achievement in communication (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). It also facilitates L2 learners in complex, diverse, and meaningful social engagement (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). However, many deaf and hard-of-hearing students have difficulties learning the grammar of L2 or a foreign language (FL). For example, Subin & Chanyoo (2018) assessed the grammatical competence of 5 Thai deaf undergraduates (derivational morphemes, inflectional morphemes, and a combination between affixes and roots). The mean scores show that 4 participants failed in all types of grammatical morphemes. Subsequently, Subin, Lertsukprasert, & Chanyoo (2022) investigated 9 English grammatical morpheme acquisition by Thai deaf university students. Based on mean scores from the fill-in-the-blank grammar test, the results show significantly low grammatical morpheme accuracy among participants. Inflectional morphemes such as irregular past tense, a copula (*be*), and possessive (*'s*) are among the lowest-scored morphemes.

4. Common Challenges in Teaching English Grammar for Deaf Students

Being *deaf* and *hard-of-hearing* are different conditions under the category of hearing loss. According to World Health Organization (1980, as cited in Olusanya et al., 2019), there are four major degrees of hearing loss, excluding normal hearing: 1) slight hearing impairment (26-40 dB); 2) moderate hearing impairment (41-60 dB); 3) severe hearing impairment (61-80 dB); and 4) profound hearing impairment, including deafness (81 dB or greater). Different degrees of hearing loss require different treatments. In deaf education, one language classroom comprises language learners with different severity of hearing impairment. In this article, the term *deaf* will be collectively used to represent students with degrees of hearing loss.

Identifying the causes of issues in teaching and learning English grammar is relatively complicated since many factors are interplaying. When one issue arises, others tend to accompany it. Language differences and negative language transfer might be causes of grammatical difficulties among EFL deaf students. Dotter (2008) offered some insights on language transfer between sign languages and spoken/written languages. Degrees of hearing loss affect how deaf students transfer their L1 background to L2. Those who experience some auditory inputs can linguistically use their L1 as a reference to the target language. As a result, language learners with moderate hearing impairment are likely to comprehend grammatical rules and uses in spoken/written language better than those who are profoundly deaf. Dotter also pointed out that spoken and written languages have different characteristics, such as formality, grammatical use, and forms of utterances. These differences might be a difficult concept of language transfer for deaf students who must learn L2 (or a foreign language) in spoken/written languages through mere reading. In addition to language differences, Dotter also stated that teachers of English paid little attention to grammatical structures. They mainly focused on translating and defining grammar points and example sentences. Their teaching methodologies of the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) are repetitive and outdated.

Alternatively, teaching and learning English grammar might be difficult due to the competence of teachers and students. Adi et al. (2017) suggested eight interesting findings from Indonesian special schools regarding

difficulties in English lessons as follows: 1) teachers' lack of material adaptation, 2) teachers' incapability to find appropriate materials, 3) students' mistakes in interpreting lip movement of teachers 4) Students' lack of attention and motivation to learn English 5) students' limitation in vocabulary repertoire 6) students' lack of background knowledge in subject matters 7) students' difficulties in distinguishing vocabularies, and 8) students' needs for teachers to repeat the content. These hindering factors are mostly a result of internal issues such as teaching skills, being unmotivated to learn a language, and a lack of background knowledge.

In addition to language transfer and competence issues, deaf students generally perceive themselves as a group of people with unique language systems and distinctive cultures from those of 'normal hearing people' (De Meulder & Murray, 2017). This strong sense of identity is important as it helps deaf people join the community. To be functional members of a community, ones must have a trustful sense of belongingness to that community. However, having too strong a perception of one own first language might hinder L2 learning attitudes. When one is already satisfied with the current stage of being, minimal efforts to change or adapt to a new language (and culture) might result. This self-made psychological hindrance might explain a cause of low-motivated L2 and FL deaf students. In their perspective, sign language is somewhat *superior* to a new language. They might question the necessity of learning English, for example, since it does not belong to their community. This thought might compel language learners in a unique community to be more excluded from other groups, resulting in difficulties in learning languages outside their community language.

5. Common Grammar Teaching Methods

Terms *approach*, *method*, *procedure*, and *technique*, are often confusing. Many people use these terms interchangeably. They might seem identical, but they are technically different. *Approach* refers to a theoretical foundation or concept of language teaching and learning, and it suggests how language teachers should model their teaching and how students learn the language. *The method* describes how teachers could practically develop language instruction based on each approach. A method consists of sequential *procedures* and perhaps multiple teaching *techniques* (Harmer, 2015). In conclusion, an *approach* refers to a theory and concept of language teaching. In contrast, a teaching *method* of *procedures* and *techniques* regards organization and instructional management by an individual approach.

Education is rather a complex system. Different approaches and methods are employed differently in different circumstances. There is no fit-for-all teaching method that is effective for all situations. As a result, teaching is an eclectic method, varying across a particular context. There are multiple and interrelating methods for teaching grammar. The traditional teaching approach may include *Grammar Translation Method (GTM)* as its essence. Those who believe in the structuralism approach may prefer *Audio-Lingual Method (ALM)* to teach grammar. Teachers who value communication and the practicality of grammar and language may be inclined toward the *Task-based Method (TBM)*. Each method has a unique history, advantages, and drawbacks. Further discussion about GTM, ALM, and TBM will be presented in this section.

5.1 Grammar Translation Method (GTM): Explicit Translation is a Key

The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) relies on a concept of the traditional teaching approach of translation from L1 to L2 and vice versa. The method originated in the early 16th century when the Latin and Greek literature appreciation period flourished. It focuses on literature interpretation and translation through reading and writing. Translation and language rules (grammar) are valued as language achievement (Chastain, 1988, as cited in Fazal et al., 2016). Major components in GTM include 1) prevalent use of students' L1, 2) explicit grammar rules teaching, 3) focus on grammar analysis and memorization, 4) disregard in teaching pronunciation, 5) explicit vocabulary teaching, 6) focus on the accuracy of grammar rules 7) students' translation skills, and 8) uses of translation-based drills. These pedagogical features are direct and simple, allowing GTM to be one of the most frequently used grammar teaching methods.

Due to the explicitness of GTM, it is globally used in many English language classes, especially in contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL), such as Thailand and Vietnam (Tieocharoen & Rimkeeratikul, 2019), China (Kong, 2011), and Indonesia (Milawati, 2019). Since GTM is mainly based on the translation of L1 to L2 (and vice versa), it shows distinctive benefits over other types of teaching methods on accuracy of grammatical rules, an instant understanding of translated meanings, and a noticeable improvement in reading and writing skills through extensive use of texts. GTM benefits all students in all contexts as the teaching is conducted mainly in their L1, the use of L2 is minimal, and teachers constantly provide dictionary meanings and examples. As a result, GTM could benefit Thai EFL learners in grammar classrooms as the method is very explicit, accuracy-oriented, and based on students' L1 and background knowledge.

Although GTM offers some novelties in teaching English grammar explicitly through L1-L2 translation, its practical effectiveness in English L2 or EFL contexts (including Thailand) is criticized by many educators. For linguists who believe in complex relationships between grammatical form, meaning, and use, such as Larsen-Freeman (2003) and Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, as cited in Fazal et al., 2016), GTM is not an ideal teaching method as it excessively highlights 1) grammatical forms and meaning 2) reading and writing skills, and 3) accuracy of grammar. In their view, grammar is not just remembering a set of rules. Rather, users must understand grammatical meanings and use them properly in different discourses. Kong (2011) and Milawati (2019) similarly criticized GTM as it is too teacher-centered with little teacher-student meaningful interactions in L2. It limits students' learning strategies and creativity in language exploration. Teachers always correct students' errors during translation, discouraging them from exercising their newly learned grammar. It also limits the roles of speaking and listening development as the main sources of teaching/learning are written literature.

5.2 Audio Lingual Method (ALM): Habit Formation and Drills

In addition to the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), many language teachers believe that desirable habit formation could lead to achievement in target-language communication (Harmer, 2015). This method is known as Audio Lingual Method (ALM). It was first introduced to language classrooms in the 1920s. The original goal of ALM was for military use when the American military had to deploy in other countries. This scope of belief could be influenced by behaviorism through stimulus-response reinforcement and repetition, aiming to teach a new language to students through peat-after-me methods. Phrases or sentences in the target language are prepared for students in a particular situation. One can imagine this kind of language teaching as a translation guidebook for foreigners. Phases in different situations (such as in greeting and hotel reservations) are taught deliberately. Teachers can correct students' utterance errors through positive reinforcement and habit formation techniques. According to Lado (1975, as cited in Lennon, 2008), errors are byproducts of differences between elements in L1 and L2; hence the concept of *Contrastive Analysis (CA)* was introduced to linguistics. The main concept of CA lies in the belief that language learners learn a new language easily if the new language shares many common characteristics with their L1. If characteristics of L1 and L2 can be identified, language teachers could form oral situation teaching methods based on finite sets of phrases or sentences.

There are benefits of using ALM in language teaching. Students' accuracy of utterances is secure, and teachers prepare grammatically correct phrases for students and ask them to repeat them until they are said correctly. This could benefit students' pronunciation development as students' production of utterances is carefully monitored. A case of Thai students in Songkhla, after receiving ALM through repetition drill technique, shows significant pronunciation improvement as their pronunciation became more intelligible and their confidence in speaking English increased (Hidayati, 2016). Another example from Kunnu (2017) in the Thai context is that 14 Thai students in Hotel and Lodging Business Management program could speak English more fluently and confidently with "adapted ALM" (integration of GTM and ALM). In summary, using ALM aids students' pronunciation skills, resulting in confidence and motivation to practice oral communication.

Although ALM is a convenient teaching tool specifically for oral communication, the authenticity of communication and teacher-student meaningful interaction are in question. Larsen-Freeman (2000) commented that the role of students in ALM is very little- just repeating what was said by teachers. Such repetition does not reflect a target language's true, meaningful, and interactive communication skills. Students must repeat in highly controlled dialogues, resulting in little improvement of total communicative competence. In addition to unauthentic situations, grammatical form and meaning are often ignored. ALM focuses on accurate oral production, not how words and sentences are formed. This lack of form-focus is the opposite of a notion of GTM. As a result, ALM only develops speaking and listening skills (particularly pronunciation). Reading and teachers often neglect writing skills. Lastly, Larsen-Freeman does not believe in ALM because it requires somewhat only repetition and memorization. These low cognitive abilities do not encourage language development in the long run. ALM's pitfalls might explain why it is not as widely used as GTM in Thailand.

Some other teaching methods are recommended in the case of Thai deaf students who study English as a foreign language. GTM looks promising in teaching English grammar, but its limitation in actual use and overall communicative competence is questionable. There is no conclusive study on what causes low grammatical proficiency among Thai deaf students, but GTM might be accountable for it. When grammar is learned, it must be used to communicate in the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; 2003). Since most English teachers in Thailand rely on GTM, including teachers for deaf students, it might be inferred that this teaching method could be responsible for grammatical competence problems among Thai deaf students.

On the other hand, ALM is also another teaching method used in Thailand. It could benefit students' pronunciation and confidence in speaking. However, it does not truly address students' reading and writing skills, the two main language skills available for deaf students. In other words, ALM might work for hearing students who can communicate orally but not for deaf students who cannot speak. An alternative teaching technique, WebQuest, is therefore presented in order to maximize the English grammatical competence of Thai deaf students through interactive technology-based instruction.

6. WebQuest: Proposed Teaching English Grammar to Deaf Students in Thailand

WebQuest is a technology-based instruction model introduced by Professor Bernie Dodge from San Diego State University in 1995. It is an interactive teaching model which allows teachers to interact with their students through meaningful content learning. WebQuest can also be regarded as a project-based learning, according to constructivist perspective (Chen, 2019). Contents from any subject can be integrated into WebQuest. The use of WebQuest is, therefore, versatile. There are many websites that teachers use to prepare their teaching for free. Depending on the variation of subject contents and instructional designs, teachers can adaptively use this model to facilitate their teaching. There are two subtypes of WebQuest: short-term WebQuest and long-term WebQuest. The former type ranges from 1-3 classes, aiming to foster specific content and skills, while long-term WebQuest may take up to one month (Kaur and Kauts, 2018, as cited in Srisinthon, 2021). Regardless of WebQuest duration, there are five major steps in WebQuest development (Manning & Carpenter, 2008):

6.1 WebQuest Introduction

Appropriate teaching materials and instructions must be prepared before class based on students' competence, needs, and differences. This stage aims to gain students' attention and direct students to the lesson. Teachers introduce objectives, procedures, and an overview of lessons to students. In addition, teachers could introduce some background of the lesson to students, creating an engaging atmosphere in class. It could be a storytelling activity, question-response activity, or simply showing some interesting clips to students.

6.2 WebQuest Task

Teachers must design tasks that are achievable, authentic, and interactive. Students should work in a group to ensure collaboration among students. Students help each other plan how to complete assigned tasks - such as giving a presentation about a topic to class or creating a group roleplay. Tasks may vary by objectives, students, and teachers.

6.3 WebQuest Process

In this step, students search for website information by themselves for task completion. Teachers can select websites with interesting themes or authentic materials, enhancing the real-life knowledge of students. Other websites from students' selection are also allowed if teachers consider them relevant and useful. This step allows students to develop their digital literacy skills and technological competence. Guidance from teachers is provided when needed.

6.4 WebQuest Evaluation

Rubrics are given to students to evaluate their websites and progress. Criteria in rubrics may vary depending on class objectives. Teachers also use rubrics to assess students' performance. This stage allows students to self-reflect and the teacher to see students' progress. If students struggle, then teachers can assist accordingly.

6.5 WebQuest Conclusion

When all students complete the tasks, they must present their activity conclusion to teachers (or classmates). Students and teachers help determine whether the class objectives and tasks are fully completed. All comments and suggestions are encouraged, and course contents are summarized in this stage.

6.6 Potential Benefits of Using WebQuest

6.6.1 Enhancement of Metacognitive Strategies

Kuimova et al. (2015) valued WebQuest as one of the best resources for learners to acquire linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge (p. 167). According to Oxford (1990), there are two main learning strategies: direct and indirect. Direct learning strategies consist of 1) memory strategies, 2) cognitive strategies, and 3) compensation strategies. Indirect learning strategies include 1) metacognitive strategies, 2) social strategies, and 3) effective strategies. Indirect strategies imply an inductive learning approach where language learners require higher critical thinking skills, self-reflection, interaction with others, and emotional control. Through the five stages of WebQuest, students could exercise their indirect learning strategies. It does not mean direct strategies

are inferior to indirect strategies. Rather, Oxford suggested that language teachers promote the use of various learning strategies in order to prepare their students for future use. March (2003) agreed that WebQuest is a scaffolding teaching method that encourages students to be active learners and critical thinkers. The nature of WebQuest allows students to be more critical through a variety of assignments and tasks. Students must apply what they learn from websites and manage plans to complete tasks. Likewise, Álvarez Ayure et al. (2018) introduced a WebQuest English vocabulary instruction to eight-graded Columbian students to evaluate its effect on their vocabulary learning and metacognitive strategies. Using of WebQuest to teach vocabulary for deaf learners was also proven effective with Turkish students (Birinci & Saricoban, 2021). The results show high students' vocabulary performance, employment of metacognitive strategies, and development of learners' autonomy.

6.6.2 Digital Literacy Skills

According to the Basic Education Core Curriculum of Thailand (Ministry of Education, 2008, pp. 1-11), technological skills are explicitly enlisted as one of five desirable qualities of Thai students in 8 learning areas in addition to communicative competencies, thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and real-life application. Employing WebQuest in grammar classrooms encourages students to develop technical mastery as one of the most required soft skills for the 21st century (technological application). Students (and teachers) can engage in technology-based instructions in meaningful, communicative manners, enabling all stakeholders to enhance digital literacy skills. All other mentioned features of successful students could be achieved through WebQuest instruction. It allows teachers and students to interact in meaningful and communicative fashions (communicative competence) through observable and assessable tasks (problem-solving skills). It also requires students to utilize their knowledge and apply it in real-life contexts (thinking and real-life application skills).

6.6.3 Review Cases of WebQuest in the Thai Context

The concept of WebQuest is relatively new in Thailand. There are not many studies regarding the use and effectiveness of WebQuest. Despite the limited number of reported applications, WebQuest is a powerful teaching tool for language development in Thai contexts. Srisithon (2021) investigated the effectiveness of WebQuest in teaching Chinese to Thai university students. She found that students who were taught through WebQuest instruction had an improvement in Chinese language proficiency. According to Saekhow & Kittisunthonphisarn (2015), WebQuest also positively affects Communicative English Lessons (significantly higher mean scores on post-test than on pretest). Likewise, WebQuest effectively enhances Thai college students' vocabulary and oral proficiency (Prapinwong, 2008). However, the use of WebQuest is yet popularized among Thai students with disabilities. Only one study was found by Kaewchote & Chongchaikit (2012) on Thai-language oral and reading skills with Thai Down Syndrome elementary students. The study suggested positive outcomes for the participants' Thai-language reading and pronunciation skills after participating in WebQuest classrooms. Surprisingly, as mentioned above, participants from these studies reported positive attitudes and satisfaction toward WebQuest instruction. This could imply promising effects for Thai deaf students' language development and attitudes towards English grammar and technology-based classrooms.

In conclusion, there is no record of WebQuest-based English lessons for Thai deaf students. Reasons might be because WebQuest is a new concept to Thai society, or teachers are unaware of its existence. This review article could perhaps be a pedagogical breakthrough in English education reformation for the deaf in Thailand. It is believed that WebQuest would benefit Thai deaf students regarding English grammatical competence, employment of metacognitive strategies, and autonomy. More studies and tryouts of WebQuest in English language lessons for deaf students are highly suggested.

7. Conclusion

This paper reviews possible challenges in teaching English grammar to Thai EFL deaf and hard-of-hearing students. It summarizes some teaching methodologies currently adopted by EFL students, including this specific group of learners. However, the current methodologies have their advantages and drawback. The authors propose a technology-based WebQuest as a good instruction to provide grammar learning to deaf and hard-to-hearing students in Thailand. This instruction also promotes students' digital literacy as it becomes one of the literacy skills the learners must possess in the 21st Century education.

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