WHAT DOES USING GRAMMATICAL TERMINOLOGY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS HINT AT?

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ABSTRACT

Adoption of grammatical terminology is common in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms in Hong Kong. However, some previous research argues that, the introduction of grammatical terminology does not facilitate students' learning of a foreign language, while some support, the use of grammar terms. The present study aims to investigate, whether Hong Kong students can accurately apply certain grammatical terminology, which they are assumed to have some knowledge about. The results of the present study imply that, although students are always having familiarity with English grammatical terminology, they may not be able to apply the taught terms accurately. In other words, the inclusion of grammar terms in ELT, does not necessarily hint students, at accurate use of English grammar structures.

KEYWORDS: *Grammatical Terminology, Grammar Items & English Language Teaching*

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INTRODUCTION

It is common to see grammatical terminologies, like verbs, subjects, pronouns, tenses and concord in textbooks, for language learners because in general, language learners are assumed to have some basic knowledge of, the grammatical structures of the language they are learning, and the grammatical terminology provides handy labels for the explanations and descriptions of various grammatical structures (Jeffries, 1985). In fact, the usage of grammatical in classrooms has long been a controversial issue, of foreign language learning (Alderson & Hudson, 2013). Studies have been discussing the use of grammatical terminology in foreign or second language classrooms (e.g. Borg, 1999; Jeffries, 1985; Berry, 2008).

Few researches support the use of grammatical terminology in language learning. Borg (1999) summarised some key arguments that are in support of the use of such terminology. In addition to providing handy labels for teaching a language, grammatical terminology facilitates learning because, it provides a “shorthand way of referring to grammatical elements”, and thus offers “an economic and precise way” for communication between teachers and students, in a language classroom. Alderson and Hudson (2013) mention in their study that, the language policy in the UK has “swung back in favour of KaL [knowledge about language]”, because researches reported that, explicit grammatical instructions positively affected students’ writing quality.

In contrast, some studies suggest that, teaching grammatical terminology would not help improve the effectiveness of learning a language. For example, Sutton (1976) argues that, “[t]here is no evidence to support the notion that knowledge of grammar terminology aids one in being a better writer, reader, speaker or listener” (p.40). In addition, with reference to other studies, Borg (1999) concludes, with some drawbacks of using grammatical

terminology in second language classrooms. For instance, learners may find it a burden to study the terminology, as they have to possess advanced Meta linguistic knowledge, to understand the terminology and the sophisticated rules, associated with the terminology.

USING GRAMMATICAL TERMINOLOGY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT), IN HONG KONG

In Hong Kong, English is a major foreign language taught in schools, which is usually a core subject in primary and secondary schools. However, in the official documents, regarding English teaching and learning in schools, whether grammatical terminology should be used in formal school curriculum has not been stated clearly; instead, teachers are advised to introduce English grammar structures to students, through a communicative approach in different contexts. According to the English language curriculum guide for primary schools (CDC, 2004), primary school children are expected to be able to manage simple grammatical items and structures, such as nouns, verbs and pronouns. Schools are suggested to incorporate the target grammar items and structures, in various contexts to serve communicative purposes, while the introduction of grammar terms to primary school children, especially those at junior levels, “should be kept to a minimum, at the primary level” (p.163). Similar advice is found in the English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide, concerning learning and teaching of English grammar at senior secondary levels (CDC & HKEAA, 2015).

Although schools are not advised to teach grammatical terminologies, Berry (2015) argues that, students in Hong Kong are indeed “full of explicit knowledge about English grammar”, in his studies. Nonetheless, Berry (2015) points out a contradictory phenomenon, in the situation of Hong Kong. On the one hand, Hong Kong students have been equipped with knowledge of a variety of English grammar terms, while on the other hand, they are unable to apply them correctly, or they may confuse such terms (p.16). The contradiction illustrates that, in English language classrooms, grammatical terminology plays an important role in Hong Kong students’ English learning experience, and students have extensive exposure to grammar terms, but when students have to apply the grammar terms, they may have problems in correctly associating them, with corresponding grammar structures.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Depending on previous studies, discussed above, the present study aimed to investigate, whether Hong Kong students can accurately apply the grammatical terminology, which they have been taught. Also, it is meaningful to find out whether the use of grammatical terminology gives students hints, to produce grammatical English sentences.

METHODS

The data were collected at a local tertiary institute in Hong Kong, which mainly offers sub-degree programmes. In order to minimize factors that would otherwise contribute to additional grammar knowledge, the subjects in this study were, students pursuing programs on science and technology, who took only the two general English courses. All the students had completed their 6-year secondary school study or equivalent, before enrolling at the institute.

All academic programmes offered by the institute require that, students take two compulsory academic English courses. The data were collected from, the term tests of one of the compulsory English courses. The usual format of the test papers includes, writing tasks and a number of multiple-choice questions, assessing students’ English knowledge and proficiency in different skills, including those on writing and reading. Among these multiple-choice questions, four typical

types of questions are used to assess, students' knowledge of English grammar. These questions are usually contextually bound by a given passage, and students have to choose the best answer among the four options provided. A set of sample questions is shown below. It should be noted that, this set of questions is only for demonstrating the question designs and has not been used in any of the tests included in the present study.

Based on the passage given below, answer the questions. Choose the best answer for each question.

¹Smart devices have _____ popular babysitters nowadays. ²However, using smart devices to babysit kids are never a smart choice. ³While parents may enjoy a quiet moment when making his kids focus on smart devices, they may underestimate the adverse effects brought by the “smart” babysitters. ⁴First, the reliance of smart devices significant reduces the communication time between parents and their kids. ⁵According to a survey...

A Sample of Type a Questions

Which of the following correctly completes sentence 1?

- become
- been become
- becoming
- became

A Sample of Type B Questions

Which of the following is the best correction of sentence 4?

- First, the reliance of smart devices significantly reduces the communication time between parents and their kids.
- First, the reliance of smart devices significant reducing the communication time between parents and their kids.
- First, the reliance of smart devices significant to reduce the communication time between parents and their kids.
- First, the reliance of smart devices significance reduces the communication time between parents and their kids.

A Sample of Type C Questions

Which of the following sentences contains a subject-verb agreement problem?

- Sentence 1
- Sentence 2
- Sentence 3
- Sentence 4

A Sample of Type D Questions

Which of the following is the grammatical error found in sentence 3?

- Mistake in use of pronoun(s)
- Mistake in use of article(s)

- Mistake in use of preposition(s)

Mistake in subject-verb agreement

As shown in the sample questions, while all the four question types cover a variety of grammar items, only Type C and Type D questions, test for explicit grammatical terminology. The grammar items and terminology, used in the test papers had been taught in the class.

Two rounds of tests in the academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16, were included in the present study. The numbers of students involved in the test were, 83 (year 2014/15) and 86 (year 2015/16) respectively. The participating students were supposed to take either round of the tests, but not both, as they were students of different cohorts. In both rounds of the tests, in addition to other question formats, students were required to attempt 30 multiple-choice questions. Among those questions, each round of the tests contained eight grammar-related multiple-choice questions, that fit the four typical types mentioned, but in different rounds, the question types were not evenly distributed and the passages used were not identical. Table 1 below, shows the number of students taking the tests and the distribution of the four types of questions:

Table 1: Number of Students and Distribution of Questions

Year	No. of Students	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D
2014/15	83	2	3	2	1
2015/16	86	4	2	1	1

During the tests, students were not allowed to use any reference materials or dictionaries.

FINDINGS

For the reason that, the number of students taking the two tests and the distribution of the four question types varied, the weighted average of accuracy of answers to each type of questions was computed for comparison:

$$\text{weighted average of accurate answers} = \frac{\text{total number of correct answers to the particular type of questions}}{\text{total number of students attempted the particular type of questions}}$$

Table 2, shows the weighted average of accurate answers to each question type. It is obviously seen that, more students (75.96%) correctly answered Type A questions than the other three types of questions. As seen in the table, when compared with the question types, testing for explicit grammatical terminology (Type C and D), Type A questions were easier for students to identify the correct answer, among the choices in both rounds of the tests.

Table 2: Weighted Average of Accurate Answers to Each Question Type

Question Types	2014/15	2015/16	Overall
Type A	62.05%	82.27%	75.69%
Type B	64.66%	36.63%	53.21%
Type C	50.60%	48.84%	50.00%
Type D	20.48%	59.30%	40.24%

On the other hand, it should be noted that Type B questions were another type of questions that was free from grammatical terminology and did not show consistency in accuracy rate, between the two rounds of tests. In the 2014/15 test, Type B questions had the highest weighted average of accuracy rate (64.66%), among the four question types, but this type of questions recorded the lowest accuracy rate (36.63%), in the 2015/16 one.

The accuracy rate of Type C questions in both the rounds of tests, was quite consistent (50.60% and 48.84%),

while there was a substantial difference shown in the accuracy rate of Type D questions, in the two tests. The accuracy rate of Type D question in the 2015/16 test (59.30%) was almost threefold of that, in the 2014/15 test (20.48%). Generally speaking, students' results in the question types with explicit grammatical terminology (Type C and D), were slightly poorer than, in those questions without explicit grammatical terminology (50.00% for Type C questions and 40.24% for Type D questions).

A statistical test was conducted to further investigate, whether the inclusion of explicit grammatical terminology would have impact on students' choice of answers. As mentioned above, Type A and Type B questions did not include any explicit grammatical terminology, while Type C and Type D questions did. Therefore, the types of questions were categorised into two groups for analysis: Group 1 (Type A and Type B questions) and Group 2 (Type C and Type D questions). A comparison of two proportions tests was done, to compute and compare the proportion of the accuracy rate of the two question groups. It is assumed that, the two groups of questions should be at the same level of difficulty for students, and the probability for students to answer the questions correctly should be equal; therefore, comparison was done based on the following hypothesis:

$$Z = \frac{(\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_2) - 0}{\sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{n_1 + n_2}}}$$

The hypothesis assumes $H_0: p_1 = p_2$ (as the probability for students to answer the questions correctly should be equal), where p_1 refers to the number of students who answer Group 1 questions correctly and p_2 refers to the number of students who answer Group 2 questions correctly. The result of the comparison is 11.913 (p-value ≈ 0), for the 2014/15 test, and 7.1039 (p-value ≈ 0) for the 2015/16 test, respectively. The results of both tests were >1.96 (at 95% confidence interval), which precisely indicate that the proportion of students who correctly answer Group 1 questions (those without grammatical terminology) is more than that of Group 2 questions (those have explicit grammatical terminology included). A consistent finding (14.952, p-value ≈ 0) is resulted when both rounds of tests are included for the comparison.

DISCUSSIONS

The results of the present study imply that although Hong Kong students are often assumed familiarity with English grammatical terminology, they may not be able to apply the terms accurately. In the present study, the participating students were taught the terminology in class, but when they were requested to identify and distinguish different grammar terms in the test questions, the explicit inclusion of these grammar terms did not necessarily hint students at the correct answers to the questions. The findings echo the arguments of the two studies concerning the knowledge of English language of Hong Kong tertiary students (Berry 2008, 2015) that students could not accurately apply many grammar terms, which their teachers assumed they were familiar with. Yet, it is noteworthy that in the present study, students could correctly answer the grammar questions even when they were not provided with the grammar terms as hints, which implies that the presence of grammar terms is not directly related to students' ability to working out correct English grammar structures.

The study of Borg (1999) may provide a ground to explain the discrepancy between students' knowledge and teachers' expectation of the role of grammatical terminology in ELT observed in the present study. One possible reason is that teachers' emphasis on grammatical terminology in lessons may make students focus more on the terms but not the grammatical structures associated with the terms because "they believe this is what teachers expect of them" (p.97).

Furthermore, the wide spectrum of grammatical terminology of the English language could be a factor leading to the discrepancy. The findings of Berry (1997) show that Hong Kong students were more familiar with two categories of grammar terms, namely major word classes (e.g. “noun”, “verb”) and verb tenses (e.g. “past tense”, “present perfect tense”) than other grammar items including those related to structural units (e.g. “noun phrase”, “clause”), verb forms (e.g. “past participle”, “infinitive”) and refined word classes (e.g. “definite article”, “modal verb”). Students felt more comfortable to apply the terms they were more familiar with rather than those they seldom used. The study of Alderson and Hudson (2013) also points out that students showed a more substantial progress in learning elementary terminology than in learning more difficult terms like “finite verbs” and “passive verbs”. In the present study, the data were drawn from the term tests of an English subject. Even though students had been taught relevant topics and grammatical terminology, they were assessed for a variety of grammar topics in one single test. In particular, the design of Type C and Type D questions required students to possess advanced metalinguistic knowledge in order to distinguish the target answer from a mix of different grammar terms in a question. A disutrisno (2008) argues that the inclusion of several testing items in one multiple-choice question not only confuses students, but also makes the question more complicated and challenging for students. Therefore, the inclusion of excessive grammar terms in a task may also distract students from working out correct English grammar structures.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the present study reveal that, explicit inclusion of grammatical terminology in ELT that does not necessarily hint to learners, the accurate use of grammar, but rather hints at the mismatch between students’ knowledge of grammatical terminology and teachers’ expectations as well, as their purposes of introducing the grammar items in ELT. Berry (1997) argues that, such mismatch may cause problems in classrooms, as weaker students may suffer most from failing to meet teachers’ expectations by, for example, obtaining low scores in assessments.

Instead of drawing any conclusions on to use, or not use the grammatical terminology in ELT classrooms, research recommends that, the decision should depend on a number of factors, such as students’ and teachers’ knowledge of the grammar items and the common classroom practices. For example, Borg (1999) suggests that, the application of grammatical terminology should be “appropriate to the maturity, knowledge, and [level of metalinguistic] sophistication of the learner” (p.98), in order to facilitate learning. Further, Berry (2008) recommends that teachers should be aware of a number of factors, including “learn ability”, “familiarity”, “theoretical validity”, “systematicity”, “utility” and “productivity” of the grammatical terminology when applying them in language classrooms.

As discussed in previous research (e.g. Borg, 1999; Jeffries, 1985), introduction of grammatical terminology can facilitate teacher-student communication in ELT classrooms, but to what extent the grammar terms should be used is worth further discussions. In addition, as reflected in the findings of the present study, assessing students’ knowledge and application of grammar terms may not be a sensible way to assess their understanding of English grammar. On the contrary, students would be burdened with the stress of applying the grammar terms when they are assumed the ability to do so. Therefore, future studies are found wanting to examine and discuss to what extent grammatical terminology could be adopted in different aspects of English language teaching.

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