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A Blended-Reflective Approach to Teaching Grammar Course: a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study that investigated the implementation of a blended-reflective approach to teaching Grammar at Chouaib Doukkali University (C.D.U), El Jadida, Morocco. Students' reflections on the teaching of Grammar and the actual classroom practices were considered to analyse and suggest some practical teaching techniques of a content-task based course. The objective is to make Grammar teaching an academic tool and a reflective course where students will be integrated as participants and not passive recipients of a language course. This grammar course is designed in accordance with the students' reflection, exploration, language use, and their status as output lesson planners that demonstrate their language awareness. Areas where practices converged with or diverged from reflections about grammar teaching were examined to find out the activities, contents and methods that have influenced the teachers' techniques and classroom management as well as the students' overall academic performance. The findings suggest that learners develop their own learning strategies to handle the grammatical tasks as well as the complexities of the tests. Thus, a reflective-blended approach to teaching this course based on a test analysis has been developed to enhance the practical teaching activities, to adopt a reflective-syntactic approach, to make learning match the objectives, while Assessment is assumed to be managed with respect to some deep and surface techniques.

Key words: Blended-Reflective Teaching, Grammar, Deep vs. Surface Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Grammar teaching has been constantly an issue that requires pedagogic and academic implementation. As a foregrounding subject, grammar is esteemed to structure the spoken and the written language used for academic, communicative or sociocultural purposes. Thus the aim of this

paper is to focus on grammar as an academic tool and a reflective course that might enable students, through a blended approach, to be involved with respect to their awareness of the structural patterns, their reflection on grammatical patterns, and their exploration of the language they use. A blended model that blends in class and online learning has proved to be an academic necessity for leaning educators to flip classrooms and use leveraged technology as learning stations in their grammar classes. The blended approach adopted in this paper is creatively answering the call to student demand for technology access and teachers' orientation to use scalable learning models and strategies.

1. Overall Grammar Program Framework

1.1 Teaching-learning framework

The grammar program designed within the English department at Chouaib Doukkali University, Morocco, aims to develop students' awareness of the structural properties of English and make use of their integrated linguistic skills, with an emphasis on written practice and drills. This learning situation has proved, however, to have some deficiencies with respect to the overall academic performance of students. For this reason, among others, a Blended –Reflective model (henceforth **BR model**) has been implemented through a test analysis and students' feedback and reflection on the grammar content delivery. In general, this BR-learning model is defined as a combination of technology, classroom instruction and students' reflection in a flexible approach to learning that recognizes enhancing the delivery of grammar course and online reflection and assessment. According to some authors, there are as many blended-learning models as there are organizational challenges (Marsh, McFadden, & Price (2003); Reid-Young (2003)). The grammar program embraced in the English studies Program at C.D.U is made up of three modules and lasts a total of two academic years. Each module runs over a 15-week term, including one week at the beginning of the term for grammatical introductory sessions and one week at the end of the term for final assessment. Each module contains about 40 hours of interactive and mechanical language learning tasks.

1.2 Grammar Teaching Methods

The question as to which method for which students always arises as a foregrounding issue that needs more exploration than specific decisions. Undoubtedly, grammar teaching methods are esteemed decisive with respect to the focal academic subject taught: Grammar. Focussing on explicit grammar teaching might produce unsuccessful language users though they acquire sufficient comprehensible input. However, with regard to the

drawbacks encountered in the ongoing process of grammar teaching, overt grammar instruction along with the methods, tools, activities, drills and other issues should be raised. In other words, authentic language, and comprehensible input of language forms are deemed to provide learners with high affective filter but poor language proficiency and fluency. Beyond the development of materials, syllabi or new teaching methods, however, Kolb (1976) states that learning is facilitated through apprehending from experience before comprehending from analysis. Yet, for reasons of the present paper, the BR model is supposed to overcome this hindering grammar learning situation. This model clearly blends the use of computer-based online access to grammatical knowledge with the in-class tutorial and practice. Technology purposefully serves the learners' access to information and interaction with other speakers in English. It serves as a resource for socially constructed knowledge and understanding (Snyder & Palmer, 1986; Penfield, 1987; Papert, 1993; Winograd&Flores, 1988); meanwhile, others claim that it plays the role of a tutor given that it delivers input in multimodal channels that allow students to practice their language skills (Coley & Griffin, 1987; Levy, 1997).

Many scholars (Chapelle, (2003, 2005), Chapelle & Jamieson, (2002; Chun & Plass, 2000), Warschauer, (1997), Warschauer & Kern, (2000), Warschauer et al., (2000) and Felix, (2003)) have devised and focussed on some of the core concepts that might help the adoption and development of the blended models. Among these concepts are the multimodal exposure to L2 input, enhanced input for noticing selected key linguistic features in each lesson, interaction through computer supported collaborative and individual learning tasks, beside the learner-fit contextualized content delivery.

2. The case study

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1 Input

For Moroccan university students for whom English is a foreign language, conscious awareness of grammatical rules is a developmental requirement. In this paper, the students' performance is used as an input for data analysis and evaluation; therefore, as model development. A test analysis is adopted and esteemed to uncover the category of grammatical deficiencies. For purposes of the present paper, students' performance in Grammar 1 (covering tenses, determiners, adverbs and adjectives), and Grammar 3 (covering the nature and function of parts of sentences, phrases and clauses) is at issue. 88 students' summative assessment performance in Grammar 1 and 81 students' summative assessment performance in Grammar 3 are used as input of the present study.

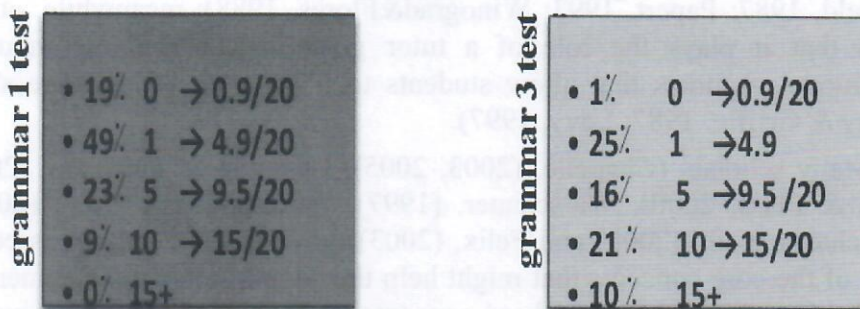
2.1.2 Procedure

The test analysis adopted in this paper aims to foreground the students' grammatical problems and their academic implications. Thus, the first thing to do is to start with a diagnosis of actual problems students have before looking for the remedial process to overcome those grammatical deficiencies.

2.1.3 Data Analysis

81 students took the grammar 1 test while 88 took the grammar 3 tests. The test scores provided us with interesting data that would serve a meticulous diagnosis of the learning situation and objective oriented teaching remedies. Consider the following test scores in grammar 1 and 3.

Diagram 1: Overall grammar test scores:



According to **Diagram 1**, the **grammar 1** test scores show the students' marked low academic performance, while the **grammar 3** test scores show a better performance. The first important information to provide is that grammar 1 examines the students' performance and awareness of parts of speech in comparison to grammar 3 which is based on the practice on parts of the sentence. Second, grammar 1 students are not yet subject to the blended model while grammar 3 students have a basic practice of this kind of learning. The negligible performance of 1/5 of grammar students is marked case that requires specific care, understanding and most importantly teachers and academicians interference. This category of students did not seem to have benefitted from the grammar teaching provided in secondary schools, nor do they show to have developed their own learning strategies. For these reasons among others, a close diagnosis of this altruistic performance in grammar 1 and 3 has been undergone to find out the areas of grammatical difficulty and try to suggest the appropriate remedies.

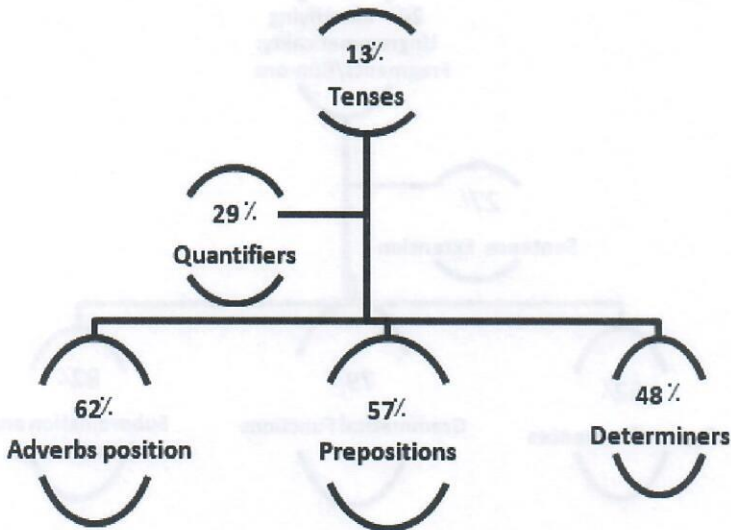
Diagram 2: Grammar 1: Correct test scores per grammatical item:

Diagram 2 shows that the use of appropriate tenses and quantifiers is still a problematic issue for university students. On the contrary, prepositions and adverbial positions are better managed. Adverbs and prepositions are, in comparison to tenses, deemed to be more conscious raising and increased frequency in communicative situations.

The tenses item has always been a problematic issue for grammar course students. The variety of tenses, their interaction and the difference they exhibit with L1 might be the source of difficulty. Beyond the practical drills, students get sufficient grammatical input on the tenses of English grammar and are required to work on the online available exercises for in-context practice reasons; however, the poor performance shown in diagram 2 above might raise issues and require other solutions. Prepositions use and adverbs positions seem to be quite easily done by grammar course students. This state of affairs might indicate that the substantives (Nouns, verbs) which constitute the substance of sentences exhibit a marked difficulty in comparison to linking items (prepositions, conjunctions) and modifiers (Adjectives and adverbs).

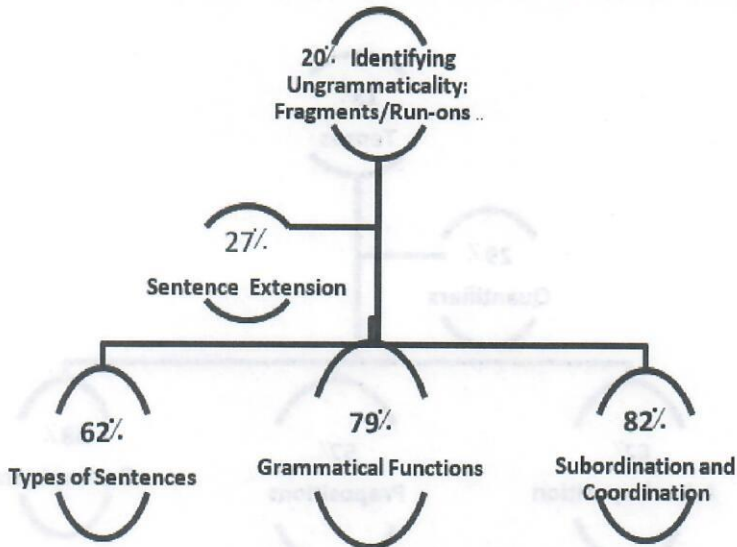
Diagram 3 : Grammar 3 : Correct test scores per grammatical item

Diagram 3 shows the students' poor performance in terms of sentence rewriting and identification of ungrammaticality, like run-on sentences, sentence or clause fragments, unparalleled structures and the misuse of subordination. Contrary to facts however, students perform better in terms of the identification of grammatical functions like: subject/object/adjective complements, object of the preposition and the types of subjects, predicates, phrases and clauses.

The objective of the course has ever been directed towards a better writing performance. However statistics show that the grammar course cannot yield the required results given the poor performance in the identification of fragments and ungrammaticality, beside the inability of sentence extension. Independent parts of the sentence are however easily identified in terms of their nature and function, a fact which illustrates the students' ability to focus on grammatical items and not grammatical structure of sentences. These facts among others would require clear and substantial recommendations for grammar teachers to reach a better academic performance.

2.1.4. Data Implementation

The basic claim that this paper underlines is the integration of theory into practice in grammar teaching. Theorizing from the classroom requires an analysis of the students' feedback which might be implemented as in the following:

1. The use of observation–feedback approach based on honing students’ skills rather than spoon feeding. The skill targeted is to prove practical grammatical awareness, while the objective is Attention span empowering.
2. Ask for reflection during the analysis of sentences and phrases with content hints (Followed by exploration of possibilities and/or difficulties).
3. Deal with performance with a focus on specific individual and not group feedback (Link difficulties to Grammar content).
4. Recommend Practice portfolios and reflective sheets and/or records.

2.2 The objective

This case study targets the following theoretical assumptions:

1. Involve a reflective practice in the teaching of a non-interactive course and adopt an approach to professional growth that moves away from standard, prescriptive responses to teaching situations
2. Target consciousness-raising rather than formal teaching and enable the student to interact positively with various educational inputs
3. Use a research-based technique that works with respect to a partnership act of the teacher as a mentor who explores, analyses, tests and evaluates his teaching practices, and the student as a non-consumer reflective participant who is supposed to leverage information and share his knowledge to provide feedback on the existing digital content
4. Combine students’ reflective practice with their extrinsic motivation, preference for mediated communication, and professional objectives (future teaching experience).

3. The Bended-Reflective model

3.1 Reflective Practice Model

According to Moon (2005:1) “Reflection is a form of mental processing that we use to fulfil a purpose or achieve an anticipated outcome”. Reflective teaching is a process where teachers examine their own teaching practices, analyse how something was taught and how the practice of a given aspect (cooperative practice) might be improved and changed for better learning outcomes. In other words, reflection is deliberate, purposeful, links theory to practice, is structured and leads to change and development.

Reflective practice, in the teaching of a non interactive course like grammar, is an approach to professional growth that moves away from standard, prescriptive responses to situations. It focuses on the complexity, variability and uncertainty prevalent in the classroom and posits that

problems cannot be solved by the simple application of technical solutions (Thompson 2002).

Donald Shön (1983) referred to the reflection in action and reflection on action and the need to link technical rationality and tacit knowledge (theory and synthesis from practice). This theory starts in practice where confusing teaching situations might arise or what Shön calls “The swampy lowlands of practice”. On another vein, Brookfield (1995:92) observes that “of all the pedagogic tasks teachers face, getting inside students’ head is the trickiest”

3.2 The Blended Model

Moroccan English departments need to switch to blended learning for the following reasons, among others. First, the students’ poor academic performance, the new students’ identity as digital natives, the digital learning styles adopted by students, the efficiency and easiness of the online content, and the students’ preference for online grammar-based activities, reading, drilling. However, the question arises as to which model to choose and implement in a grammar class? Consider some blended model briefly summarized as follows: (- See more at: <http://www.dreambox.com/blog/6-models-blended-learning#sthash.ydxxWZox.dpuf>)

A) Face-to-Face Driver Model

Among the blended learning models, face-to-face driver is regarded as the most appropriate to a typical school structure. While using this approach, students, who are working above their grammatical competency level, might progress at their own pace themselves. Essentially, this approach might engage English language learners because they’re not native speakers.

B) Rotation Model

This form of blended learning requires that students rotate between the online learning and the face-to-face time with the teacher. This rotational model, although common in elementary schools, might be extended to the university level with regard to the challenging students’ academic needs and digital facilities available to them.

C) Flex Model

In this approach, content is primarily delivered online and the learners are primarily self-guided as they practice new grammatical concepts in a digital environment. The flex model is mostly addressed to students with socio-behavioural and/or academic challenges.

D) Online Lab Model

The online lab model of blended learning helps students to complete unavailable courses in case of tight resource constraints. Students learn entirely online but consult a dedicated computer lab to complete their coursework. Students will therefore work at a pace and in an appropriate quality digital learning environment.

E) Self-Blend Model

The self-blend model of blended learning is probably the model that is most prevalent among university students in that they demonstrate such learning style while covering digital content beyond what is already offered at the university. High self motivation is a requirement for this self-blend model for students who wish for better test scores and successful academic performance.

F) Online Driver Model

In this online Driver Model, students are provided with material via an online platform and are offered online teaching assistance. This model of blended learning is ideal for students who require more independence and flexibility

4. The BR model in grammar practice

4.1 Sentence Reanalysis Strategy

From the affective perspective, the teacher might help the learner to avoid the extremes of being confused and frustrated by sentence grammatical complexities. The sentence reanalysis strategy would be carried out while synthesizing from unstructured writing, defossilizing the common errors, and reflection through demonstration/reanalysis: The student considers different possibilities/answers using rehabilitation of unstructured sentences. The major outcome expected is to reinforce grammatical awareness and compensate for the non-communicative nature of the subject.

This BR model of grammar teaching is based accordingly on a partnership act. First, students reflect on the digital content via VLC online library and filmed lectures while handling ungraded online drills. Second, the exploration of pedagogic content knowledge in terms of in-class practices where the teacher invokes asymmetries with digital content and

explores students' suggestions. Three, the teacher maintains testing as objective-oriented, reliable, practice-based and reflective.

4.2 Deep and Surface teaching strategy

Blended models of teaching try to blend the online investigation and learning with the face to face and printed paper teaching. However, the model proposed in this paper incorporates the students' reflection on both aspects. This fact presupposes the undertaking of two different teaching structures:

4.2.1. Deep teaching structure (Autonomous learner)

The deep teaching structure aims to foster the interest, motivation and participation of the learner in an autonomous and safe learning environment. So, it is basically an autonomous e-learning situation where no intervention of the teacher is involved. Timely unlimited, this deep teaching structure allows the student to go over the digital content where he or she can choose the time, the place, the group or individual work, the filmed lecture or the Power Point presentation. Also, the available ungraded online worksheets will make it a relaxed testing environment that might provide a positive learning environment and probably a better academic achievement.

In practical terms, the teacher provides learners with substantial theoretical grammatical input that covers all the grammatical in-context manifestations, and then checks the understanding of the concept while indicating the theoretical basis rather than mere overt corrections of the mistakes made. The covert correction, in this regard, is part of a deep teaching structure that should target raising the learner's grammatical awareness of the concepts before and after drilling.

4.2.2. Surface Teaching structure (The learner as a partner)

The surface teaching structure is also a reflective strategy that helps the teacher to structure the grammar course in accordance with the in-class feedback and practice of the learner as a partner. This partnership relationship will allow both the teacher and the student to structure the learning situation in a win-win relationship. The student benefits from his involvement and reflection while the teacher benefits from the current positive learning situation to reach the academic objectives. As an in-class practice, the surface teaching targets the analytical potentials of the learner who is supposed to provide logical, rule-based and practical awareness of the grammatical concepts. The reflective side of the grammar will therefore be based on the students' demonstration of the processes, not the results. So this surface strategy will be more inductive to ensure a certain degree of

grammatical awareness of the processes involved in the field. Contrary to the timely unlimited deep teaching structure, the surface teaching structure is limited in terms of the time devoted for feedback, reflection and grammatical drilling. The teacher's interventions is done to check the coverage of the digital content to incorporate it into the grammar course, while surface mistakes or anomalies are accounted for by students either as peer or individual work, or else in graded worksheets.

Following this line of research, the current reflective practice seems to blend the online practice and in-class practices in a complementary fashion where dependency and theory integration into practice are realized.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A blended-reflective approach to the teaching of grammar at Chouaib Doukkali University is proposed in this paper to find out the most appropriate blended pedagogic tools that transfer the grammatical knowledge in a reflective partnership framework. This model relies on the digital and in-class management of the content, drills and activities in a partnership fashion. For this reason, some deep and surface teaching structures have been proposed to find out the appropriate digital and comprehensive remedies to the ambiguous grammar teaching-learning situation. The student who demonstrates various grammatical difficulties is esteemed, in this paper, to be a potential partner who is enabled to reflect on the learning act as an autonomous learner and participates in the learning teaching enterprise as a partner.

The proposed BR model has been tested and has provided the learners involved in this study more space for reflection and integration, more materials for practice, and more valuable communicative roles in the new blended forms of English learning and teaching.

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