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1-14-2022

## Exploring Techniques of Addressing Grammar in CLT Classes: A Qualitative Study

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### Recommended APA Citation

Ostovar-Namaghi, S. A., Kamali, S., & Moezzi-pour, F. (2022). Exploring Techniques of Addressing Grammar in CLT Classes: A Qualitative Study. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(1), 187-196. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.4363>

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## Exploring Techniques of Addressing Grammar in CLT Classes: A Qualitative Study

### Abstract

Learners who have learned English through the audio-lingual method have a profound knowledge of grammar, but they cannot use it to communicate their knowledge and experience fluently. To solve this problem, there was a shift towards communicative language teaching (CLT). This shift towards CLT solved the fluency problem but created another unwanted effect since learners were communicatively competent but linguistically incompetent. While many teachers weed out form as irrelevant, some CLT teachers try to respond to this problem by addressing form in CLT classes. This study aims at conceptualizing these teachers' perspectives and uncover the strategies they use in addressing grammar in communicative instruction. Following the constructivist grounded theory procedures, participants' perspectives were theoretically sampled through in-depth, open-ended interviews. Abstraction and thematic analysis of participants' experiences clearly revealed that the participants helped learners not only discover the target form but also connect it to their experience. It was also found that they used contrastive analysis, contextualization of input flood, and the integrated skill approach to address form in predominantly communicative classes. These findings have clear implications for teachers, teacher trainers and school policy makers.

### Keywords

teachers' strategies, grammar instruction, communicative instruction, interview data, grounded theory

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## Exploring Techniques of Addressing Grammar in CLT Classes: A Qualitative Study

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Learners who have learned English through the audio-lingual method have a profound knowledge of grammar, but they cannot use it to communicate their knowledge and experience fluently. To solve this problem, there was a shift towards communicative language teaching (CLT). This shift towards CLT solved the fluency problem but created another unwanted effect since learners were communicatively competent but linguistically incompetent. While many teachers weed out form as irrelevant, some CLT teachers try to respond to this problem by addressing form in CLT classes. This study aims at conceptualizing these teachers' perspectives and uncover the strategies they use in addressing grammar in communicative instruction. Following the constructivist grounded theory procedures, participants' perspectives were theoretically sampled through in-depth, open-ended interviews. Abstraction and thematic analysis of participants' experiences clearly revealed that the participants helped learners not only discover the target form but also connect it to their experience. It was also found that they used contrastive analysis, contextualization of input flood, and the integrated skill approach to address form in predominantly communicative classes. These findings have clear implications for teachers, teacher trainers and school policy makers.

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### Introduction

Although grammar is an integral part of language learning, there have been some controversies on how grammar should be taught in EFL classrooms. Crivos and Luchini (2012) discussed that the emphasis has changed from teaching grammar to helping learners discover, learn, and apply the grammatical structures. Contrary to this suggestion, Larsen Freeman (2003) argues that learning about the form of language is very substantial for EFL learners and that deductive approaches to grammar rules is considered an effective pedagogical technique. Other scholars emphasize that teaching grammar should aim at enabling learners to notice the linguistic features via grammar consciousness-raising tasks (CR). Many researchers have found CR more attractive than other approaches; hence, many studies have been conducted to test its effectiveness. Scholars like Fotos and Ellis (1991) tested the comparative effect of CR on two groups of Japanese EFL college students. They found that the group that was exposed to CR outperformed those who were exposed to the traditional mode of grammar instruction. They concluded that consciousness-raising tasks are very effective because they cause noticing and proficiency gains.

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In addition, Sheen (1992), in a similar study, set out to measure direct and indirect consciousness-raising tasks. The findings revealed that both groups preformed equally well in a written post-test of the structures taught. In another study, Amirian and Sadeghi (2012) found that students who were exposed to CR significantly outperformed those who were exposed to pattern drill practice. In a similar study, Doan Dang and Nguyen (2012) compared the differential effects of CR and the deductive approach under experimental conditions. The results revealed that the experimental group who learned grammar through CT outperformed those were involved in analysis of grammar rules. It has also been found that:

- consciousness-raising activities produced a significant difference in learners' internalization and use of present tense (Sugiharto, 2006)
- both types of CR treatment (i.e., teacher-fronted grammar lessons and grammar problem-solving tasks) were effective in helping learners notice the target form (Fotos, 1994).

Another useful teaching strategy that has attracted the practitioners' interest is teaching grammar through focused tasks. Focused tasks are tasks "aimed to predispose learners to process, receptively or productively, [and/or] some particular linguistic feature, for example, a grammatical structure" (Ellis, 2003, p. 16). This approach is more effective in teaching more complex structures. For instance, past conditional sentences include a wide range of functions, and their form also results in clauses which are very long and difficult for EFL learners to process and remember (Parrot, 2000; Thornbury, 2001). Moreover, "the so-called third conditional is typically taught at a relatively advanced stage, both because of its syntactic complexity and because it expresses a concept that is itself fairly opaque, that is, hypothetical past time" (Thornbury, 2000, p. 97). Ellis (1995) suggested that this problem can be solved by applying grammar-focused tasks, which help learners notice how form and meaning interact. Fotos (1995, 2002) found that the use of focused tasks helps learners master *if* clauses through fruitful communicative activities.

Another group of scholars believe that learners' awareness of formal features of language depends on the quality of input or input enhancement. In other words, input is effective if the teacher manipulates input so that the target form becomes more salient (Barcroft, 2003). Through input enhancement, the teacher helps learners notice the target form by enhancing it in one way or another. This is an important caveat because we can't expect the learner to learn a form without first noticing it in the input (Robinson, 2003). Along these lines, many researchers have tried to test the hypothesis that acquiring forms depends on attention. Strangely, there have been mixed results. Some studies have concluded that input enhancement has a significant positive effect on learning (Lee, 2007; Williams, 2005). Conversely, others have shown that manipulating form does not have any significant effect on learning (Bowles, 2003; Izumi, 2002; Wong, 2003). There is a third group who believe that this approach negatively affects learning. For instance, Lee (2007) found that input enhancement negatively affects comprehension.

As the review clearly shows, the results of the empirical studies which explored the effect of focus on form in ELT instruction are inclusive. However, in the early 1990s, scholars came to realize that meaning-focused approaches such as CLT would improve greatly if some attention is paid to form (e.g., Van Patten, 1989). Moreover, grammatical competence is an integral part of communicative competence. Taking the importance of grammar into account, some language teachers try to address grammar in CLT classes. As the review shows, there is a dearth of knowledge as to how language teachers address grammar in classes which are predominantly communicative. Uncovering how teachers address form in CLT classes and

feeding them to teacher education programs will help both the theory and practice of language teaching.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the undeniable role of form in expressing meaning, CLT advocates downplay the role of grammar by ignoring linguistic forms (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). While the traditional notion of focus on forms entails a decontextualized presentation and practice of isolated linguistic forms through teacher-fronted modes of teaching, focus on form entails an integration of form, meaning, and function in the process of negotiating meaning in L2 (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Knowing that CLT students are communicatively competent but linguistically incompetent, some CLT teachers try to resolve this issue by focusing on form in CLT classes. Although this issue is critically important, very little is known as to how these teachers integrate form and meaning in CLT classes. To fill this gap, this study aims at exploring the strategies and techniques language teachers adopt to address form in CLT classes. In other words, it aims at answering the following grand tour question:

- What strategies do EFL teachers adopt to address form in CLT classes?

### **Research Context**

English language education takes two forms in Iran. Public high schools teach English to prepare students for a high-stake university admission test which focuses on written skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Private language schools, which run evening classes, focus on developing students' oral proficiency. Taking the importance of oral communication into account, many of these language schools instruct teachers to follow a communicative approach. While some teachers ignore grammar, there are some teachers who believe that students' awareness of grammar greatly improves their communicative ability. As an educator, I believe that ignoring grammar in CLT classes deprives students of an important linguistic resource; hence, we tried to locate teachers who shared our concern and explore how they address grammar in CLT classes.

### **Research Method**

This study follows the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In contrast with the positivist approach to grounded theory, in this approach, ideas are raised and discussed, and knowledge is mutually constructed (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). In line with this approach, we actively interacted with the participants, not only to bring English language teachers' strategies and techniques of addressing form in CLT classes to the surface, but also to present a thick description, which is generated through and rooted in interaction between the researcher and the participants.

### **Participants**

The participants were selected through a snowball sampling procedure. The interview process started with an experienced language teacher who was willing to share her perspectives and experience with us. After the interview, we asked the participant to introduce other interested language teachers who shared the same concern. In all, we interviewed 12 language teachers, five men and seven women. They all had more than seven years of English teaching

experience in private language schools of Mashad, the capital city of Central Khorasan province, located in the eastern parts of Iran. The participants were between 24-35 years old.

## Data Collection and Analysis

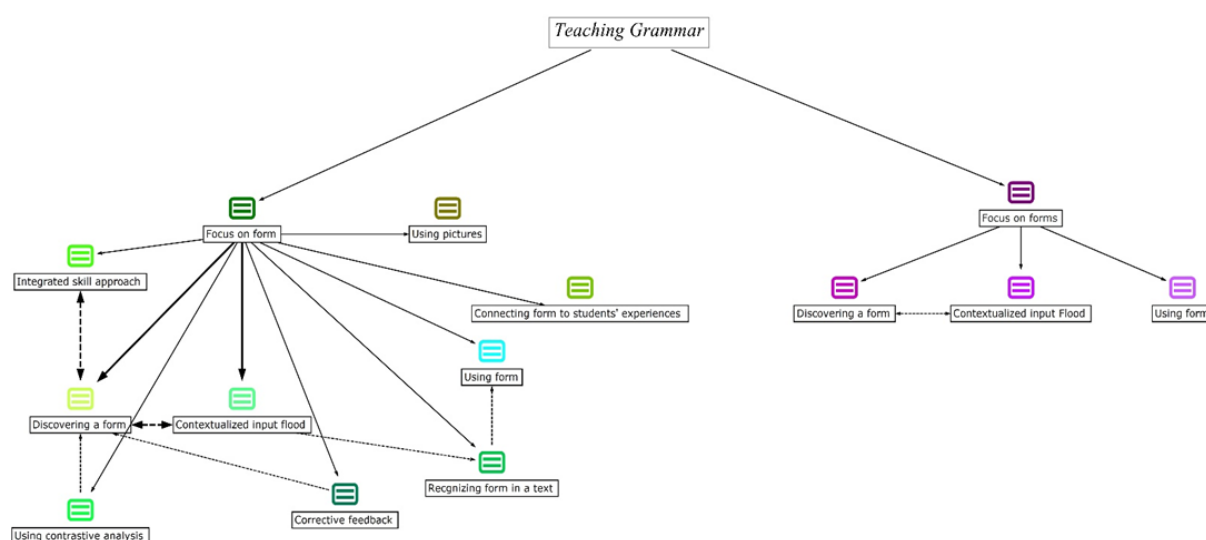
Guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) we collected and analyzed data simultaneously. In the context of this study, there isn't an institutional review board for the protection of human subjects, but we did our best to protect the participants' rights; hence, prior to the interviews, we held a briefing session in which we clarified the purpose and process of data collection and sought the participants' informed consent. Using intensive interviewing, we then collected the data through active engagement with the participants. To uncover how the participants address grammar in CLT classes, we: (1) audio-taped the participants' perspectives and made field notes simultaneously; (2) transcribed the interview data verbatim; (3) read through the data carefully and labeled the sentences and paragraphs with descriptive codes; (4) synthesized codes into themes to summarize and describe the strategies the participants used to address grammar in CLT classes; (5) continued the iterative process of data collection and analysis until the emerged categories reached a point of theoretical saturation; (6) established the credibility of the findings through member checking; (7) modified the final conceptualization of the participants' perspectives by accommodating the participants' feedback and suggestions; and (8) ensured that the emerged codes and categories are grounded in the participants' perspectives through constant comparative techniques. Moreover, we fed the emerged codes, themes and the data that substantiate them into MAXQDA software. Figure 1 shows the semantic map which schematically represents the emerged categories.

## Results

Iterative data collection and analysis yielded some categories which represent how the participants addressed grammar in CLT classes. The emerged categories together with the data that substantiate them were fed into MAXQDA software to visualize the findings of this data-driven study. Figure 1 shows the semantic network which was drawn via Max-Map.

**Figure 1**

*Semantic Network Visualizing Techniques of Addressing Grammar*



It visually represents techniques of addressing grammar and how they are related to each other. What follows aims at explaining some of the categories and then presenting substantiating evidence to show that both the categories and our understanding of the categories are grounded in the participants' perspectives.

### **Helping Students Discover the Target Form**

Helping learners discover the target form is one of the most frequently used techniques. In contrast with the transmission model where learners were the passive recipients of forms, participants believed that instruction should help EFL learners discover the target form through exposure to a flood of examples. For instance, instead of explaining the rule, one of the participants explains writes and underlines the target forms on the board and then encourages the learners to discover the form. For instance, she teaches "action verb + adverb" as follows, "My father *drives slowly* and *carefully* but my mother drives *carelessly*. My little sister *talks softly* but my little brother *shouts angrily* when he is angry...." (TP5). Just like TP5, another participant helps learners discover present perfect continuous by immersing learners in examples of what they have been doing. "I *have been teaching* English for half an hour. You *have been learning* for half an hour. I *have been speaking* for half an hour. You *have been listening* for half an hour (TP2).

### **Connecting the Target Form to Students' Experiences**

Having helped learners discover the target feature through examples as illustrated above, the participants try to help learners use the form they have discovered in describing their real-life experience. Emphasizing the importance of this phase, one of the participants explains, "I encourage learners to talk about what they have been doing in the past few years to help them connect present perfect continuous to their life experience" (TP3). Most of the participants believed that helping learners discover a form is necessary but not sufficient. Helping learners connect what they have learned to their personal thoughts and experiences not only deepens their understanding of the target form but also helps them use what they have learned. Reiterating the importance of this phase, another participant explains, "Helping learners discover simple present tense is not sufficient. To help them connect this tense to their real life, I encourage them to talk about their daily activities" (TP7).

### **Using Contrastive Analysis**

Another technique the participants used in addressing form in CLT is the use of contrastive analysis, which is rooted in behaviorism and structuralism. Some first and target structures are different, but learners are not aware of these differences. The participants believe that they can help learners overcome this problem by systematically comparing the first and the target language structures. One of the participants explains, "Many students use 'although' and 'but' in the same sentence. Although this is permissible in Persian, it is not allowed in English. To help them overcome this problem, I present some sentences that systematically juxtaposes the Persian and English structures and by doing so I help them discover the difference" (TP1). Another participant explains the usefulness of this technique in helping students realize why sentences such as "I like apple" is wrong. He explains, "using contrastive analysis, I help my students realize this problem through pairs such as, 'I like apple/ I like apples,' 'My sister doesn't like orange/ My sister doesn't like oranges'" (TP3). I also help them notice that the first sentence of each pair is Persian.

## Input Flooding

Another frequent technique the participants used to address form in a predominantly communicative class was input flooding. Nation (1990) defines input flooding as repeated exposure to the same structure through a written text. This process helps learners notice the target form (Wong, 2003). Approving of this technique, one of the participants explains, “I believe repeated exposure to the same structure helps learners not only realize its form but also realize how it functions to communicate meaning. To address exclamatory sentences, I read extracts from Little Red Riding Hood which expose learners to sentences such as “Grandmother, what big arms you have, what big ears you have, what big eyes you have, and what big teeth you have...” (TP8). With a focus on authentic repeated exposure, another participant uses Goldilocks and the Three Little Bears to raise learners’ awareness and authentic use of present perfect continuous by exposing learners to sentences such as: “*Someone has been eating my porridge, someone has been sitting in my chair, someone has been sleeping in my bed*” (TP6).

The participants further explained that being aware of a specific form is quite different from using it to communicate meaning; hence, they used input flooding not only to draw students’ attention to a specific form through repeated exposure, but also to enable them to realize how that form is used to communicate meaning by exposing them to authentic texts.

## Integrating Form and Meaning

The participants agreed that in a dominantly meaning-oriented CLT class, learners’ awareness of forms should also be developed. In other words, they believed that form and meaning should be systematically integrated. Participants believed that this can be done in different ways, including delayed corrective feedback. Explaining how he systematically integrates form and meaning in CLT classes, one of the participants states,

I integrate form and meaning in a two-phase process. In the first phase of the class, I involve students in communication and while they are communicating, I observe their performance and make note of their errors. In the second phase of the classroom, I write some instances of the learners’ errors on the board without specifying the students who made those mistakes. In this phase through interaction with the learners, I provide them with the correct forms and then address each mistake separately, I make more sentences following the corrected form. (TP12)

Participants believe that form and meaning can also be systematically integrated through reading passages. Explaining how she integrates form and meaning through reading passages, one of the participants states,

I believe form and meaning are equally important. Therefore, they should be presented in an integrated fashion. I do this in three separate phases. First, with a focus on meaning, I help learners reconstruct the ideas presented by the text. Second, I instruct them to work in pairs and exchange their understating of the text orally. Finally, I highlight some structures and tell the students to read the text with a focus on the parts which have been highlighted. (TP7)



## Conclusion and Implications

Many CLT students are communicatively competent but linguistically incompetent. Some teachers try to solve this problem systematically. This study selected a purposive sample of these teachers and explored their perspectives through grounded theory procedures. Iterative data collection and analysis yielded a set of categories which show how these teachers address form in CLT classes. These findings are consistent with previous theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. The first and most applied strategy under the influence of focus on form instruction is discovering a form. Highlighting the role of discovering a form, Amirian and Sadeghi (2012) conducted a study in order to investigate the influence of grammar consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' performance and concluded that applying such techniques by participants was effective. Contextualized input flood was another point of convergence with previous studies such as Trahey and White (1993) and Trahey (1996). They found that acquisition happens when EFL learners are exposed to the target structure frequently. Finally, integrating form and meaning, as suggested by the participants, lends support to content- and language-integrated learning (e.g., Cámara Ortiz, 2014; Chostelidoua & Grivab, 2014). Based on the merits of addressing form in CLT classes, which is derived from the participants' perspectives and also supported by previous theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, it is suggested that:

- materials developers apply the principles of focus-on-form perspective to develop more effective teaching tools and materials;
- teachers leave room for focus on form and raise learners' awareness of how language works in the light of evidence-based strategies presented by this and other data-driven studies;
- educators raise prospective language teachers' awareness of the importance of integrating form and meaning in CLT classes which are predominantly message-oriented; and
- test developers add a form-focused dimension to the communicative and functional tests, and by doing so, encourage teachers to focus on form in CLT classes.

Not only is focus on form supported by previous theoretical perspectives but it is also approved by experienced practitioners in this data-driven study. Although we did our best to account for researcher bias through member checking and the constant comparative technique, the findings of this study may not truly reflect the reality of what happens in actual teaching contexts; hence, to shed some light of the findings of this study it is suggested that interested researchers:

- test the effectiveness of the suggested techniques under tight experimental conditions;
- explore learners' perceptions of focus on form in CLT classes; and
- explore the possible discrepancies between teachers' perceptions and focus on form and the way they actually implement it in practice.

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**Article Citation**

Ostovar-Namaghi, S. A., Kamali, S., & Moezzi-pour, F. (2022). Exploring techniques of addressing grammar in CLT classes: A qualitative study. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(1), 187-196. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.4363>

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