COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING TO HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS IN VIETNAM

KHUONG THI HONG CAM
Kangan Institute, Australia - hongcam0604vn@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnamese high schools, English is mainly delivered in grammar translation method to ameliorate student achievement in grammar-oriented examinations. In a long term, students suffer from fatigue and failure to communicate properly. This research aimed to apply the communicative approach in grammar teaching to improve students' communicative competence and enhance their interest in grammar lessons. To obtain the above targets, a conceptual framework of studying grammar was shaped with the view that grammar should be studied in a context. The study employed reflective approach as the main research design and quantitative approach as a supplementary method. A teaching program with four trialed grammar lessons was implemented in TNH High School, Vietnam and data were collected from two instruments of observation and questionnaire. The findings showed that the students' communicative competence and interest in the grammar lessons were significantly enhanced. The research outcomes were then translated into several recommendations to improve the quality of grammar teaching and learning at high schools in Vietnam.

Keywords: Communicative approach; English; Grammar teaching; Language in context; Vietnam.

1. Context of grammar teaching in Vietnam

In response to the globalization trend, English has become a compulsory subject at all Vietnamese high schools to provide students with a new tool of communication in the 'borderless' world where it has become an international language. It is essential for learners to equally develop four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing so as to become competent English users. However, in reality Vietnamese students struggle to use this language for oral communication although they have years of schooling with English as a mandatory component (Nhat, 2017; Phuong and Uyen, 2014).

One of the detected problems with the teaching of English at high schools is the grammar dominated exams (Toan, 2013) and, consequently, the teachers' over-use of grammar translation method (Ho and Binh, 2014; Nhat, 2017). Specifically, the teaching and learning goes in the following sequence. First, the teacher presents grammar rules of the target structure and examples and then reads the usage of the rules. The students passively listen to their teacher's explanation and then write down the rules and usage of the grammatical item. The next stage is mechanical drills with decontextualised sentences. Communicative activities such as role-plays, problem-solving tasks, or information gap activities are exotic to students in most grammar sessions (Anh, 2013; Canh, 1999).

In recent years, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has conducted a plethora of reforms in the educational system. Curricula, teaching materials and facilities are undergoing a major overhaul. The English grammar in Vietnamese high school textbooks is allocated to a separate section of teaching explicitly, yet the grammar points are still decontextualized. Therefore, prescriptive grammar teaching still prevails (Anh, 2013; Phuong and Uyen, 2014). Vietnamese scholars also agreed that grammar should be taught in a communicative manner. Canh (2009) conducts a survey of Vietnamese

teachers' attitudes towards grammar and grammar teaching in their own particular teaching context. The findings show that the teachers favour a discourse, rather than a decontextualised approach to the presentation of grammar. Anh (2013) also recommended that grammar should be taught concurrently with its context of use in order to enhance students' performance and interest after reviewing the current state-of-the-art English grammar teaching at Vietnamese high schools.

This reality stimulated the researcher to conduct a study to improve the students' ability to use English to communicate through grammar lessons. To achieve the above aim, grammar lessons were designed and delivered in a communicative way. The research was conducted to answer the following questions:

1 How do the students express their feelings and attitudes, and perform during the communicative grammar lessons?
2 What are the students' reflections after being taught communicative grammar in terms of lesson content, task design, and feelings?

2. Studying grammar: a theoretical framework

There has been much debate among linguists about the two models in the study of grammar, *form-based* and *function-based*, which will be elaborated upon in this section.

2.1. Form-based grammars

Grammars based on the theory of language as an autonomous system includes *traditional grammar* and *transformational-generative grammar*.

Traditional grammar is a theory of the structure of language based on ideas from Western societies inherited from ancient Greek and Roman sources (Sharma, 2005). In the traditional grammarians' perspectives, a grammar should provide a set of rules for correct language use and the correctness was judged through the rules of the grammar of Latin. Specifically, this model "relies on categorizing words into parts of speech; describing grammatical relations such as subject, predicate, and direct object; and recognizing natural groupings (constituents) such as phrases, clauses and sentences" (Barry, 2002, p.63).

This type of grammar is completely formal and, hence, contains various drawbacks. For instance, it is "normative and prescriptive rather than explicit and descriptive" (Sharma, 2005, p.85). Similarly, it specifies the correct way of using language without context rather than provides descriptions of the actually spoken language.

Another representative of the form-based model is transformational-generative grammar generated by Chomsky (1968). The main purpose of his model is to describe the basis transformation necessary to create permissible sentences in any given language. His idea was clarified as follows:

> …the grammar of a language must contain a system of rules that characterizes deep and surface structures and the transformational relation between them, and – if it is to accommodate the creative aspect of language use – that does an infinite domain of paired deep and surface structures (p.15).

As such, transformational-generative grammar definitely focuses on linguistic competence. Although an infinite number of grammatical sentences can be generated, the formation of rules excludes the generation of grammatically incorrect sentences. Well-formedness is a must, which is against the reality that very few people know grammar perfectly or use it correctly at all time. Furthermore, the syntactic analysis cannot deal with non-factual meaning that can only be examined in the social context of language (Donnelly, 1994).

2.2. Function-based grammars

If the form-based grammars deal with the language at the level of sentence and

linguistic competence, the function-based ones operate at that text and are concerned with communicative competence in the way that the meaning of language is always considered in its social context. The paradigm of socially grounded grammars includes two main grammatical types of *systemic-functional grammar* and *discourse grammar*.

Systemic functional grammar, which originated from the theory of systemic functional linguistics, deals with both written and spoken language with all types of text that are used to achieve the social purposes. Specifically, "everything in the grammar can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used" (Halliday, 1994, p. xiii) and systemic functional grammar has an aim to "construct a grammar for the purpose of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about my text either spoken or written, in modern English" (p. xv).

In this model, the clause, not the sentence, is considered to be the basic choices which are socially grounded and "represent the meaning potential of any given language" (McCarthy, 2001, p. 59). The choices of certain part of speech within the grammatical system are dependent on social concerns. Therefore, although this grammatical model sounds opposite to form-based ones, it does not "reject, discard or replace terminology of traditional grammar" (Butt, Fahey, Spink, and Yallop, 1995, p. 31). Actually, the notion of traditional grammar is built on and refined in a systemic functional way which means that each linguistic element should not be looked at in isolation but in relation to others.

Another distinct function-based theory is discourse grammar. This model has an explicit stance against Chomskyan one in the manner that it denies the view of grammar as an autonomous system and emphasizes the effects of the context of verbal interaction in the form of discourse on linguistic structure. Specifically, a clear-cut distinction between discourse-based and sentence-based grammars is that the former makes "strong connection between form, function, and context and aims to place appropriateness and use at the center of its description" (Hughes and McCarthy, 1998, as cited in Paltridge, 2006, p. 129). What is more, it also "acknowledges language choice, promotes awareness of interpersonal factors in grammatical choice, and can provide insights into areas of grammar that previously lacked a satisfactory explanation" (p. 129).

Similarly, this type of grammar views "grammatical meaning as interactively determined rather than being inherently 'in' the structure under scrutiny. It is clear that such a view of grammar is well out of kilter with an idealized, sentence-based, Chomskyan approach to language description …" (McCarthy, 2001, p. 106). In fact, it ideally aims to serve a view of language as socially embedded. The value of discourse-based grammar over the formal ones is highly appreciated by Celce-Murcia along with Larsen-Freeman (1991) with an argument that the mere focus on grammatical form without considering its functional meanings in discourse "paints only an impoverished picture of language" and "fails to unite grammar with its use of interaction" (as cited in McCarthy, 2001, p. 109).

3. Principles for grammar pedagogy

In the previous section, grammar should be studied concurrently with its social context rather than autonomously as an abstract system. Following it, this part will explore how the theory works in the practice of grammar teaching.

3.1. Principles for creating context for grammar teaching

The way to bring context in grammar lessons should be carefully considered to get the desirable results in its teaching and learning. A good context must have three characteristics of authenticity, informative background provision, and interest attraction.

First, the appropriateness of the context can be achieved if the teacher brings something "real" and "useful outside the classroom" (Lewis & Hill, 1992, p. 28). Second, the context should "provide the background for a lot of language use so that students can use the information not only for the repetition of model sentences but also for making their own sentences" (Ur, 1996, p. 57).

Finally, context should attract students' interest. Figuratively, it should be made "seductive" in the way that the students cannot resist it but they have to "dig" it and "get their hand dirty" (Ehrenworth and Vinton, 2005, p.89).

3.2. Principles for creating tasks for grammar in context

When grammatical structures are taught, teachers are, or should be asking students to learn "a large number of different though related bits of knowledge and skills" (Ur, 1988, p. 6) which are recognition, identification and production of the target structure. Specifically, they have to know how to recognize the examples of the structure from a spoken or written text, how to identify its form and meaning in context, how to produce both its written and spoken form and meaningful sentences in appropriate context using it themselves. Therefore, teachers need to include context while designing tasks for presenting, practicing and consolidating the target structure. This means that they necessarily contextualize the structural forms and integrate one or more communicative skills in *all* teaching stages, namely *Presentation, Practice* and *Production* (3Ps). The models for these 3Ps stages will be specifically elaborated on the following parts.

3.2.1. Model of presentation

The aim of the presentation is to introduce students the form and meaning as well as the appropriate use of a new piece of language in both speech and writing (Harmer, 1991; Ur, 1996). This stage is of importance to the process of learning a structure since it helps students take the grammatical point into their short-term memory and equips them with necessary input for the communicative activities at the later stages (Harmer, 1991, p. 56).

When conducting this stage, teachers should replace traditional procedure in which rules of a grammatical item are explained before examples of its actual use. They, in a reversed way, should provide the students with an opportunity to discover the underlying pattern through context (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005; Harmer, 1991). To do this, they can give them a reading or listening (i.e. written or spoken) text which contains the target structure and let them do some "problem-solving" tasks individually or in pairs or groups with the text to discover by themselves what the pattern is and how it works in that context (Harmer, 1991, pp.71-72). This procedure attracts their attention to the meaning and use before the form of the target structure. This shift aims to make the concept become clearer and help them achieve noticing within a rich environment of communication. After they finish the tasks, the teacher will ask them what they have found and discuss the answers with them to clarify the form, meaning and use of the target structure, which is implicitly the explanation stage.

3.2.2. Model of practice

The aim of this stage, specifically, is to help students further absorb the form of the structure and the focus at this stage is on the accuracy of what the students are saying and writing (Harmer, 1991; Ur, 1988).

To achieve that aim, controlled activities are designed. However, in the method under discussion, although practice tasks retain focus on correct production, they need to ensure to sound "communicatively authentic" and lead learners to recognize the "communicative function" of the grammatical form (Littlewood, 1981, pp. 10-11).

Therefore, necessary attention should be paid to the techniques of designing the controlled practice in context. Traditionally,

much practice with sentence-based exercises creates many students who can learn to successfully complete those exercises but remain unable to appropriately use the features practiced. Thus, Lock (1996) suggests giving practice at text level, holding that text-based practice, either in speech or writing, strongly associates structure with its meanings in context; hence, it likely enables learners to produce proper items in similar contexts in later occasions.

In designing tasks for this stage, teachers can modify the mechanical exercises in the textbooks by requiring the students to deal with texts rather than isolated sentences or they can create the tasks themselves in the same way. The tasks that are designed in these ways definitely help students practice the accurate structural forms simultaneously with communicative purposes, but they are more controlled in what to say or write. In order to fulfill these tasks, students can be required to work individually or in pairs to write or talk, depending on what activities they are doing. Teachers can slightly intervene to give the students some immediate guide if their language is not formally accurate (Harmer, 1991, p. 50).

3.2.3. Model of production

This stage, which most textbooks are devoid of, is the most productive, and hence, the most exciting one (Ur, 1988). While the controlled practice in the previous stage deals with the accurate form, the free one in this stage focuses on achieving its meaning and fluency in communicating.

Due to such a shift in focus from accuracy to fluency, the tasks designed for this stage should accordingly be different from those in the previous one in the way that they should make learners perform more freely and "less controlled by the specific prompts but more controlled by the need to produce language in response to the functional and social demands of social interaction" (Littlewood, 1981, p. 10). To put it another way, the activities should be able to give the students a real purpose to communicate as well as a better chance to engage themselves in "a varied use of language" so that they can "do their best to use the language as individuals, arriving at a degree of language autonomy" (Harmer, 1991, p. 51). In order to design communicative tasks like those, teachers should also consider the elements of context as the practice tasks but at the higher level of challenge and freedom.

During this stage, teachers can also ask students to work individually, in pairs or in groups. Pair work and group work are more favorable since students have a chance to use language to communicate with their peers (Harmer, 1991). Moreover, since the appropriacy of using language has more attraction in communication than the well-formedness, greater emphasis of corrective feedback is put on mistakes that hinder fluent communication than on those concerned with accurate forms (Littlewood, 1981). Therefore, correction should be delayed to be corrected later so as not to prevent learners from communicating (Harmer, 1991).

In brief, the principles for task design in the three stages show that the form, meaning and use of a target structure should be introduced, practiced and consolidated with the embedded context. Ideally, four skills should be simultaneously integrated in each stage.

4. Research methodology

This research employs a reflective teaching approach – a type of qualitative method – as a dominant approach and quantitative approach as a supplementary one. Reflective teaching is the best method for researchers who attempt to make a change from "routine action" to "reflective action" (Pollard and Collin, 2005, p. 13). Specifically, routine action is "static" and "unresponsive to changing priorities and circumstance" since it is guided by factors such as "tradition, habit, and authority and by institutional definitions

and expectations" while reflective action refers to the "willingness to engage in self-appraisal and development" and implies "flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness" (ibid.). The researcher also employs a quantitative method in this study to confirm the qualitative results. The combined methods are used to obtain findings that are more reliable and provide a more comprehensive explanation of the research problem than either method can provide alone.

Based on the shaped theory, a teaching program with four grammar lessons was carried out at TNT High School in Vietnam. To prepare lesson plans for the teaching practice as summarized in Table 1, the researcher consulted two communicative English course books to find out how the trialed grammar points were taught. The books provided her with some communicative activities of which she could make use in designing her own tasks for the students. The following books were taken as reference:

1) Cunningham, S. & Moor, P. (2005). *New cutting edge* (early-intermediate). Harlow: Longman.
2) Hutchinson, T. (1996). *American hotline* (intermediate). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The participants consisted of twenty-five 10th grade students from class 10A3. This class included three males and twenty-two females of the same age. Their English scores on a ten-point marking scale ranged from 3.1 to 7.5 based on the evaluation test at the beginning of the school year. Data from the two sources of observation and questionnaire were collected to answer the two formulated research questions respectively. These data were then divided into two types of text and descriptive statistics for analysis and interpretation.

Table 1

Summary of four grammar lessons

Lessons / Stages	Statements of Reported speech	Conditional sentences of type two	The passive voice	Non-defining vs. defining relative clauses
Presentation	- Introduction of reported speech through a listening text (with a task) in which a person reported a story to her friend and direct speech through a reading text for later comparison (individual work) - Discovery of the form, meaning and use through the two texts (pair work)	- Introduction of an unreal condition in the present through a listening text (with a task) of a survey for the Daily Mail poll to know how socially responsible people were (individual work) - Discovery of the form, meaning and use through the listening script (pair work)	- Introduction of the passive voice through a listening text of a conversation between a supervisor and her employee (with a task) (individual work) - Discovery of the form, meaning and use through the listening script (pair work)	- Introduction of the two types of relative clauses through a listening text defining the prom (with a task) (individual work) - Discovery of the form, meaning and use through the listening script (pair work)

Lessons / Stages	Statements of Reported speech	Conditional sentences of type two	The passive voice	Non-defining vs. defining relative clauses
Practice	- Role-play in the form of a game for transmitting given information (group work)	- Oral interaction with a psychological test with unreal conditions (pair work)	- Information gaps with a given written text (pair work)	- Information gaps with a given written text (pair work)
Production	- Game of real information transmission (group work)	- Role-play to collect information for the school magazine poll to see how socially responsible the student's partner was (pair work)	- Discussion to figure out solutions to environmental problems (group work)	- Game for finding information through explanations (group work)

5. Findings and discussions

5.1. Research question 1: How do the students express their feelings and attitudes, and perform during the communicative grammar lessons?

The observation data collected from two main sources: *audio recordings* and *teacher's notes* helped answer the first research question. Illustrated in Table 2 is the summary of observation data.

Table 2

Summary of observation data

TOPIC	MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES	SUB-SUB-THEMES	ACHIEVEMENTS	DRAWBACKS	LESSONS			
						1	2	3	4
COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR	BEFORE CLASS	STUDENTS' FEELINGS AND ATTITUDES			unfamiliarity with integration of speaking and listening	✓			
					difficult listening	✓	✓		
					concern about assessment	✓			
				interest in the new method			✓	✓	✓
	DURING CLASS	PRESENTATIN	LISTENING TASK	eagerness in answering		✓	✓	✓	✓
		STUDENTS' FEELINGS AND ATTITUDES	DISCOVERY TASK	active group work		✓	✓	✓	✓
				voluntariness		✓	✓	✓	✓
					passiveness	✓	✓		
					worries about forms	✓			

TOPIC	MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES		SUB-SUB-THEMES	ACHIEVEMENTS	DRAWBACKS	LESSONS			
							1	2	3	4
		STUDENTS' PERFORMANCES		LISTENING TASK		difficult listening	✓	✓	✓	
					correct answers in listening tasks		✓	✓	✓	✓
				DISCOVERY TASK	correct form discovery		✓	✓	✓	✓
					correct meaning discovery		✓	✓	✓	✓
	PRACTICE	STUDENTS' FEELINGS AND ATTITUDES			enthusiastic talk		✓	✓	✓	✓
		STUDENTS' PERFORMANCES			correct in both form and meaning		✓	✓	✓	✓
						wrong forms	✓	✓	✓	
	PRODUCTION	STUDENTS' FEELINGS AND ATTITUDES			eagerness and enjoyment in discussion and games		✓	✓	✓	✓
						passiveness	✓	✓		
		STUDENTS' PERFORMANCES			maintenance of meaning		✓	✓	✓	✓
						wrong forms	✓	✓	✓	✓

5.1.1. Students' feelings and attitudes

In the initial lesson, six students showed that they were not interested in learning grammar conducted in the approach under discussion. They found it strange to learn a grammar lesson in which speaking and listening were integrated. Two of them also assumed that listening would be very "difficult" (F19 & F22) and one student wondered whether the listening task would be "assessed" (F22). Their reactions showed that they used to learn grammar lessons without communication and were only motivated by marks to study it. So, they did not appear to be really enthusiastic when the teacher introduced the first so-called "communicative" grammar lesson.

During the conduction of the first lesson, a couple of the students expressed their *worries* and showed *passiveness*. Two students showed that they were *worried* about the grammatical form. Specifically, they posed concerning questions about the one under discussion, such as "What should we change the simple future to?" (F21), or "How about the past perfect?" (F19). These students normally expected that the teacher should give them all the ways to convert from the direct to indirect speech. Therefore, when the simple future and past perfect were not mentioned deliberately by the teacher, they immediately asked about these forms. In addition to the feeling of anxiety about the form, *passiveness* could be noticed. Two students (F10, F12) sitting in the first row did not say a word in the discovery task. Furthermore, in the production stage three students (F3, F10 & F14) did not join in the activity. They just stood and looked at their fellows, but did not contribute anything. It should be pointed out that these students were rather weak in comparison with the average background of

other students. Their lack of activeness can be attributed to the complexity of the new method for their level.

However, it is evident that the students' high learning spirit was expressed through their activeness and eagerness in most activities. Nearly half of the class (11/25) eagerly gave answers to the listening task items and about the same number of the students (10/25) actively volunteered to answer the discovery questions. Although all the answers were not correctly produced, their activeness was a good signal. Similarly, group discussions in all the three stages of the lesson, particularly in the production stage, could be described as being hectic and joyful with some descriptive terms such as "huddled heads", "enthusiastic talk", and "burst of laughter". Several clearly heard voices (3/25 in the discovery task, 4/25 in the practice task and 4/25 in the production task) besides choral sounds, such as laughter, shouting and applause, also demonstrated the real class atmosphere. These data proved that the tasks designed in this new method succeeded in encouraging these students to think and work actively with their peers as well as improving the learning atmosphere.

Moving to the second lesson, some unfavorable comments about this trialed method still existed. In particular, F19 frown on her face, asking "Listen again, ma'am?" The other student, namely F21, complained that "Last time the listening task was too difficult!" This feeling was possibly derived from the difficulties that some students had encountered in the previous lesson. Yet compared with the first lesson, the second one showed that all the positive aspects were retained and one satisfactory signal was added. At the beginning of the class, smiles and choral yell to greet the teacher could be documented. Three students also voiced that they would prefer to learn grammar with games like that in the last lesson. F16 and F3 explicitly begged: "Games please, Ma'am!" and F19 added: "Please let us play game like we played last time, but with presents, Ma'am!" These documented descriptions proclaimed that the previous lesson was successful to some extent, since it left some impression on a few students at least. This is a significant point in the teacher's second attempt.

During the class, the activities in the three stages of presentation, practice and production were conducted more smoothly than those for the first lesson and met the planned objectives in terms of the students' feelings and their performances. Many students were still eager and active in most tasks: listening (12/25), discovery (14/25), practice (10/25), and production (14/25). Particularly, in the practice task, the whole class talked so enthusiastically that the teacher had to signal them to stop three times but they did not. What is more, students' laughter was recorded in some sessions of the practice stage. An image of students lowering their heads on writing and yawning in a traditional grammar lesson was now changed to a picture of students talking and laughing. With such a change, the learning atmosphere was friendlier and more attractive to the students.

The positive aspects discussed in the first two lessons were still maintained in the third one. Many students not only appeared to be interested, eager and active, but they also got satisfying performances in all the tasks. Before the class started, three students (F21, F22 & F4) stated explicitly that they liked to learn with the new method. Unlike some feelings in the first lesson, those expressed by the very students for this one indicated that they gradually accepted the application of the trialed method in their grammar lessons. Eagerness in both discussion and answering questions were still the main expression in most tasks. It was evident in the voices heard in presentation (6/25), practice (9/25) and production (11/25), not to mention choral sounds and voices.

Among four presented lessons, the last one gained the most obvious attainments. In all three stages, the strong point to be acknowledged was that the students could adapt well to the trialed method in terms of their feelings. The students manifested positive feelings and learning attitudes from the beginning to the end of the lesson. Before the class, four students said that they liked to learn with the new method and hoped the teacher to continue teaching them the following year. During three stages of the lesson, most students were enthusiastic to make contribution and participation. Particularly, all the students showed their interest in the production task. They were very excited, especially when their representatives could give out a required word. No students sat still. Laughter, applause, gestures, and the like were recorded during this stage.

In conclusion, the observation data analysis demonstrated that the students' feelings and attitudes were enhanced over the trialed teaching period. In the first lesson, the number of positive items was equal to that number of negative ones. However, the number of the students who behaved positively outweighed those who acted negatively in the lesson. The second lesson still maintained the good aspects of the approach and certainly reduced the negative ones. Particularly, the students who showed positive behaviors increased dramatically in comparison with those in the previous lesson. The third lesson considerably decreased many of the drawbacks and simultaneously maintained and enhanced the positive outcomes. Particularly, more students joined in the activities; therefore, more choral sound was recorded instead of only some dominant voices in the two previous lessons. In the final lesson, their feelings in the grammar lesson were totally changed from boredom to excitement.

5.1.2. Students' performances

At the beginning of the trial process, poor performance was among the negative outcomes. Three students spoke clearly that the listening text was hard to understand and one student explicitly asked for listening for the third time. Four students in the first rows failed to understand the recording in the listening task since they could not fill anything in the blanks provided. These students' behaviors confirmed the negative feeling about listening expressed previously. Also, five students produced wrong reported forms such as tenses or adverbs in doing practice tasks (F12, F3 & F14) and production ones (F4 & M3). The poor performance reflected that these students were not accustomed to either verbal practice or quick reaction. The drawbacks in the first lesson resulted from the unfamiliarity with the new approach, i.e. the integration of listening and speaking in a grammar lesson. Actually, they were the essential outcomes of the traditional method. However, it should be acknowledged that they were only the reactions of a minority of the students.

Despite these named limitations, several achievements were recognized at the researcher's first attempt. Two presentation tasks were completed with satisfactory results. Although the listening task caused several difficulties as described earlier, 8/10 items were answered correctly by over one fifth of the students (7/25). This outcome indicated that at the beginning four students (F22, F19, F21 & F4) were worried about listening task due to their unfamiliarity with listening skill in grammar lessons and their lack of confidence in doing it. Similarly, all the questions for discovering the form and meaning of the structure under investigation were answered with accuracy by 6/25 and 3/25 students respectively. The correctness of their answers demonstrated that as a matter of fact the two texts provided good contexts for the exploration of the differences between the form and meaning of the reported speech.

In addition, some students' acceptable

performance was also revealed in the practice and production tasks. In more details, three students (F13, F15 & F18) who were asked to report the sayings in their practice handouts produced well-formed speeches with maintained key ideas of the direct speech. Also, two nominated students (F4 & M3) in the production stage satisfactorily reproduced in written language the stories that their classmates had reported to them in terms of content though some formal problems were still not surmounted. The students' performances in these two stages along with those in the presentation stage reveal that the meaning of the reported speech was achieved to some extent.

Unlike the first lesson, the second one revealed that the students' poor performance was only recorded in the listening and production tasks. In the former, seven students asked for the teacher's playing the recording for the third time, since they found it hard to understand what the audio voices said. In addition, three weak students (F5, F10 & F16) could not write anything and only copied their fellows' works. Likewise, in the latter, four weak students (F12, F8, F15 & F16) gave a wrong form such as "will" instead of "would". These four students neglected the form in this task due to the more requirement of fluency than accuracy. As a consequence, while they were busy with meaning, they obviously forgot the form.

The second trialed obtained most of the expected results. A great majority of the answers (7/9) in the listening task were correctly given although several students made many complaints about it earlier. Similarly, the discovery questions were accurately answered in chorus. The meaning and form of the conditional sentences of type 2 were duly exploited thanks to the context in the listening task. The practice and production tasks were also completed by a few students (4/25 and 10/25 respectively). Since the last task put more emphasis on the meaning, several mistakes on the form were tolerated.

In the third lesson, the main disadvantages of this lesson also revolved around the *listening task* and the *form*. Three students (F21, F1 & F19) found the listening task still difficult for them because they overtly asked the teacher for listening for the third time. After some periods with listening, these students still got troubles in grasping the ideas from authentic recorded voices. Similarly, the problems with grammatical form were left unsolved. One fifth of the students (5/25) did not pay much attention to the form while they were doing the practice and production tasks. Therefore, they made quite a lot of mechanical mistakes such as "What they were given?" (M3) and "They are planted at the time of George Washington" (F17).

Nevertheless, the requirements of the tasks can be said to have been satisfactorily met. In the listening task, all five blanks were accurately completed. Additionally, the discovery questions were correctly answered by 6/25 students. Particularly, the data in the practice task reflected a significant achievement in both form and meaning made by nearly one fourth of the students (6/25). Especially, one of them was F12, a weak student, who always needed help from her friends and the teacher. She could produce both questions and answers smoothly. For instance, "What was the land needed for?" and "They were planted at the time of George Washington." In the production task, a notable achievement was the ability to create new ideas by one fourth of the class (6/25).

The drawbacks in the last lesson only came from the problem with producing incorrect form in the production task. In the activity the students were required to give explanations to a given object by the teacher, some of the students' explanations were not well-formed. However, in terms of communication, the lack of focus on form was understandable because this lesson put an

emphasis on the ability to communicate ideas. More importantly, formal errors did not prevent the learners from understanding each other. Therefore, as a rule, they could be tolerated, especially in the last stage of the lesson where the focus was on meaning, but not form.

Significantly, the students performed well in all the assigned tasks in the final lesson. The listening task was considered to be easy for them and they could fill in 4/4 blanks correctly. The discovery questions were also answered well by three voluntary students. The practice and production tasks demonstrated how much the students could understand the form and meaning of the target structure. In the practice task, 7/25 observed students voiced accurate sentences. In the production task, the whole class concentrated on explaining the objects to their representatives in a communicative game. Their performances vividly reflected that most of the words written on the board were well explained by the two teams and discovered by the representatives. Surprisingly, two of those students (F4 & F19), who explained those words, could use the relative clauses very correctly. Judged from the description above, the last lesson brought a big change in the two aspects of students' feelings and attitudes as well as their performances. With the trialed method, they made good progress in the ability to absorb and produce the target language in proper situations. Their communicative skills were also comparatively enhanced.

5.1.3. Discussions

The findings showed that teacher enabled the students to gain communicative competence and enhanced their interest in learning grammar by contextualizing the grammar lessons and designing tasks. These findings advocated the theory of function-based grammar (Halliday, 1994; McCarthy, 2001).

Regarding the preparation of communicative grammar lessons, the recourse to communicative course-books which, in our cases, were *Cutting edge* (Cunningham and Moor, 2005) and *American hotline* (Hutchinson, 1996) was successful in bringing authentic contexts to the introduction, practice as well as consolidation of the form, meaning and use of the target structures as suggested by previous scholars (Lewis and Hill, 1992; Ur, 1996). Furthermore, the adaptation of the references to be suitable for the students' real life were able to interest them (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005).

During three teaching stages (3Ps), the findings from observation revealed positive reflections. In the presentation stage, the form, meaning and appropriate use of a grammar point were presented in both speech and writing as Harmer (1991) and Ur (1988) put forward. The students had an opportunity to discover the underlying pattern with listening texts (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005; Harmer, 1991). In the first two lessons, several students could not adapt themselves to the new teaching method and behaved negatively such as being passive or/and worried about the form and the difficulty in listening task. These students also performed poorly in some tasks, particularly in the last one that required the ability to reproduce the target structures. However, since they had academic levels either average or lower than the background of the class, their negative feelings and failure illustrated the lack of immediate adaptation to a new method. The students' performances and interest were gradually boosted and became conspicuous in the last lesson.

In the practice stage, tasks were designed with text-based practice in either speech or writing as Lock (1996) proposed. The researcher also modified the mechanical exercises in the textbooks by integrating texts rather than isolated sentences (Harmer, 1991). The students' performance and feeling were virtually positive in four consecutive lessons. However, they still had some confusion about

forms in the first three lessons, and then improved in the last lesson.

The production stage was most innovated with activities that provided students a real purpose to communicate (Harmer, 1991). During this stage, although the students still made mistakes with the forms and showed their passiveness in the first two lessons, they expressed their enjoyment with the activities and grasped the understanding of meaning through all four lessons.

In brief, there were two tendencies towards the students' feelings and performances elicited from the observation data. The greatest of the achievements was the maintenance of the positive attitudes and performances over time. Meanwhile, the drawbacks ranged from reduction to even elimination to the completion of the teaching program. The changes started in the second lesson and gradually became more and more conspicuous from the third to the last one.

5.2. Research question 2: What are the students' reflections after being taught communicative grammar in terms of lesson content, task design, and feelings?

Questionnaires were deployed to help answer the second research question. The data were converted into the three measurements of raw count, percentage and mean. Since this last type of data only serves to triangulate observation data, the trend can be spotted via the calculation of means or central tendencies only. Therefore, the raw counts and percentages are not necessarily scrutinized. The following analysis will investigate the students' attitudes reflected in the questionnaire data towards the three main themes of *lesson content*, *task design* and *students' feelings*.

5.2.1. Lesson content

The data on lesson content are categorized into the three sub main themes of *form*, *meaning* and *integration* for investigation. For better comparison, the two first sub-themes will be combined for analysis and interpretation (Chart 1). The last one will be addressed for isolated exploration later.

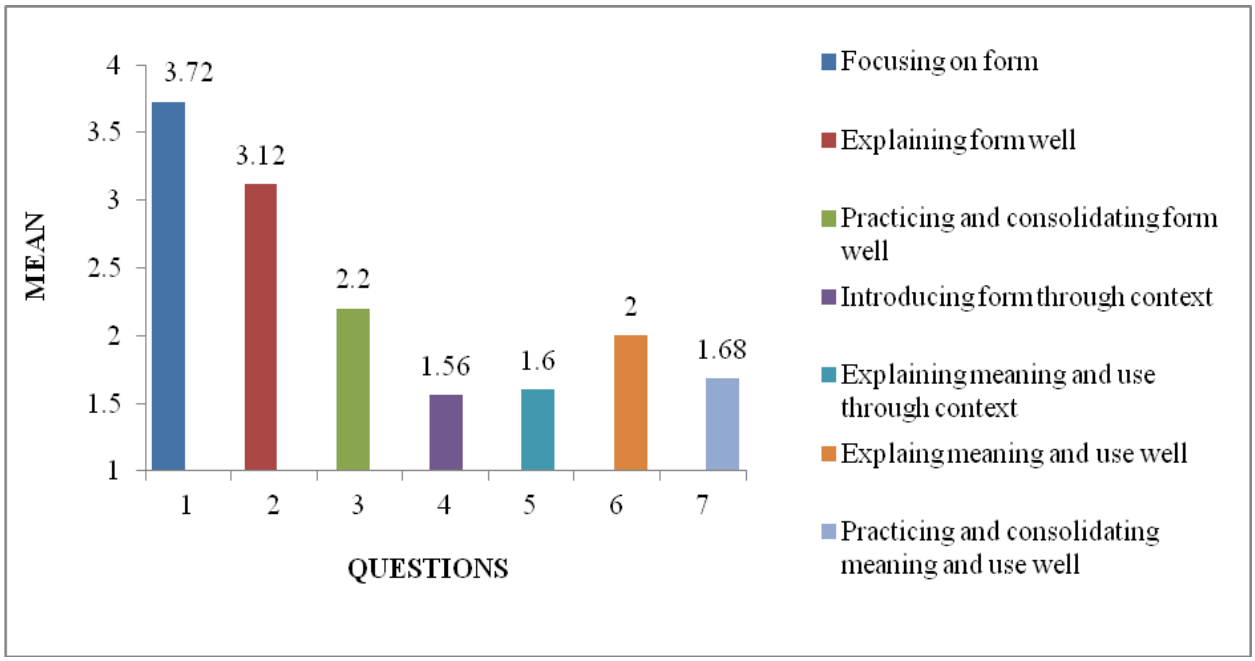

Chart 1. Students' attitudes towards form and meaning

As a whole, the students showed unfavorable opinions at one end and gradually changed ideas to reverse attitudes towards the other end. Most students disagreed that the *form* was focused on (M = 3.72) and they were rather unsure that it was well explained (M = 3.12). However, they quite approved that it was well practiced and consolidated (M = 2.2). Most interestingly, they advocated that the form was introduced through context (M = 1.56). Their feedback showed that they actually concentrated on the form although at first it did not seem to be a visible focus. The embedding of context to explore the form as Harmer (1991) proposed was achieved.

At the other end of the continuum, all the statements related to *meaning* were highly backed up by the students since M ranged from 1.56 to 2.0, well below the middle point of 3.0. Most of the students recognized the active role of context in explaining the meaning and use of the structure (M = 1.6). Therefore, in a like manner, they agreed that the meaning and use were well explained (M = 2) and well practiced and consolidated (M = 1.68). Their options convincingly proved that the meaning and use were much emphasized in the conducted lessons, which is in line with the framework of Harmer (1991) and Ur (1996).

In the sub-theme of *integration* (Chart 2), the situation was positive when a majority of the students agreed that four communicative skills were integrated in the grammar lessons (M revolved around 1.36 and 2.52).

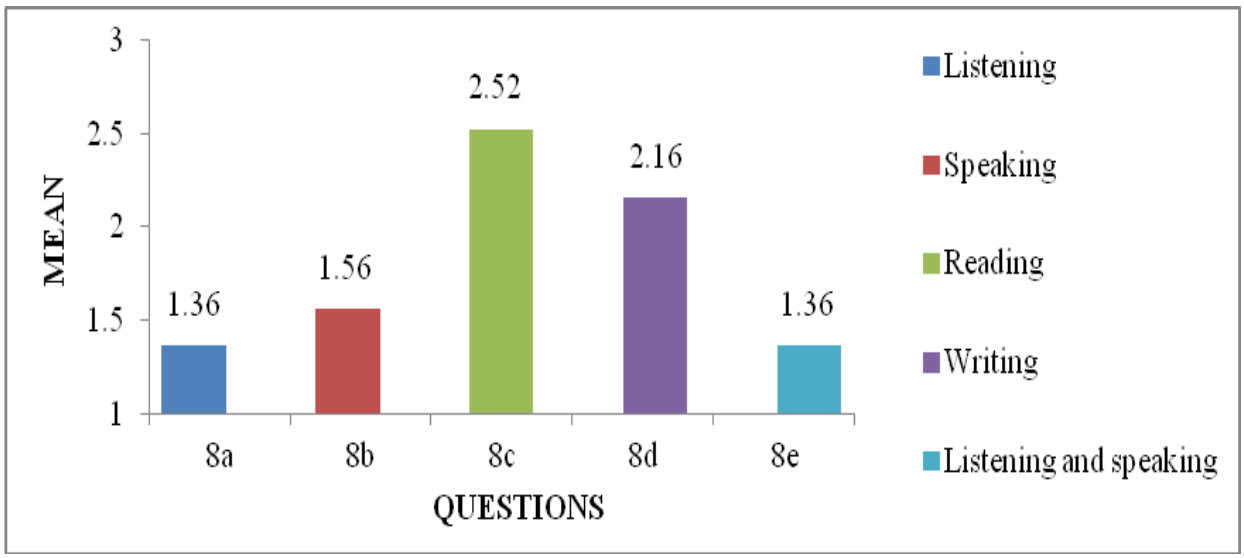

Chart 2. Students' attitudes towards integration

Specifically, listening, speaking and the combination of these two skills received the most votes, as the means read 1.36, 1.56 and 1.36 respectively. Writing ranked the fourth (M = 2.16) and reading got the lowest support (M = 2.52). Although the reading skill was the least supported by the students, it was remarked as being somewhat integrated. The concern raised by Phuong and Uyen (2014) was solved when both oral and written skills were integrated in the lessons.

5.2.2. Task design

The students' attitudes towards task design in *presentation* stage and in *practice* and *production* stages will be presented.

Having a quick look at the means ranging from 1.72 to 2.60 in Chart 3, one can easily figure out that a majority of the students found the tasks in the presentation stage well designed in terms of *form*, *meaning* and *use* thanks to contextualization via listening activities.

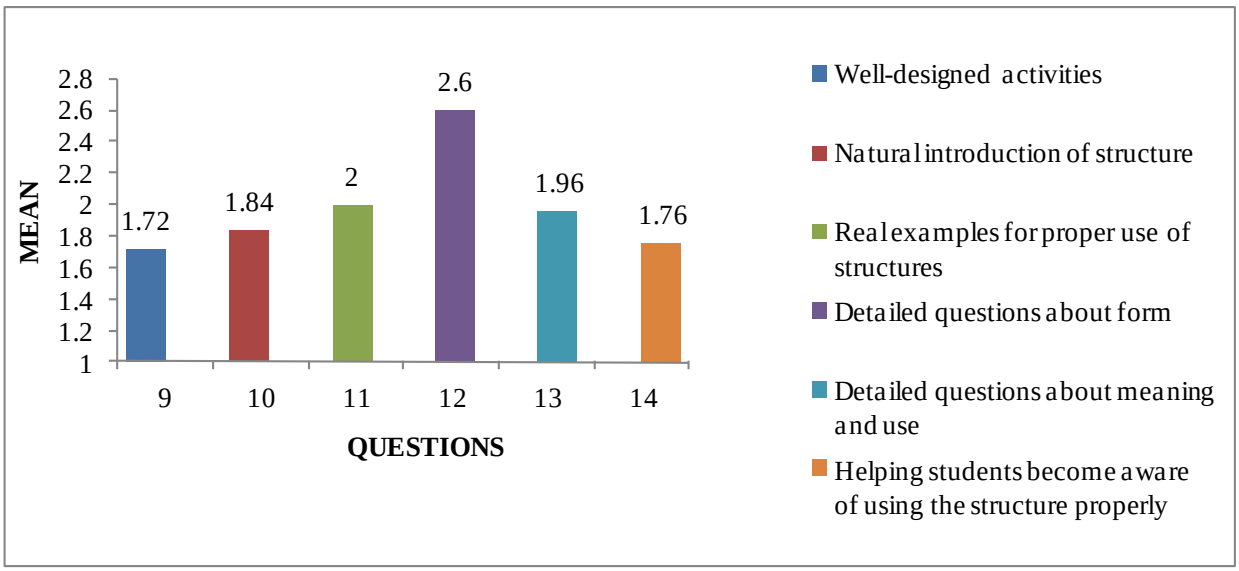

Chart 3. Students' attitudes towards task design in presentation stage

Most of the students thought the listening activities were properly designed (M = 1.72). The reason was then given for this proper design: the structure under scrutiny was normally embedded in a context of use. Thus the students agreed that these activities helped introduce the structure naturally (M = 1.84), so they could provide real examples to help use the structure in a proper context (M = 2).

In another aspect of this stage, the discovery task, the students highly supported the careful design of the questions about meaning and use (M = 1.96). Satisfactorily, they quite agreed that the questions about form were designed in detail (M = 2.6). Thanks to the attention paid to the three aspects of form, meaning and use at the same, they strongly approved that the questions on the second end of the form-meaning continuum helped them become aware of the use of the structure in a proper context (M = 1.76).

According to Chart 4, a majority of the students held the view that the tasks in the practice and production stages were well created (M ranged from 1.68 to 2.84). They agreed that the activities in these stages were various (M = 1.8) to meet different targets of each stage, namely focus on accuracy in practice stage (M = 2.84) and on fluency in production stage (M = 2.32). This variety was implied to encompass all the three main aspects of grammar teaching in both practice and production to achieve communication. Therefore, later on a great number of the students supported the idea that the tasks helped them improve their communicative skills (M = 1.68). Besides, being consistent with their comments earlier on the lesson content, they agreed that the tasks helped them grasp not only the meaning and use (M = 1.88) but also the form (M = 1.84). Since the latter was drilled as well, they had quite optimistic expectations about their performance on normal form-oriented tests (M = 2.12).

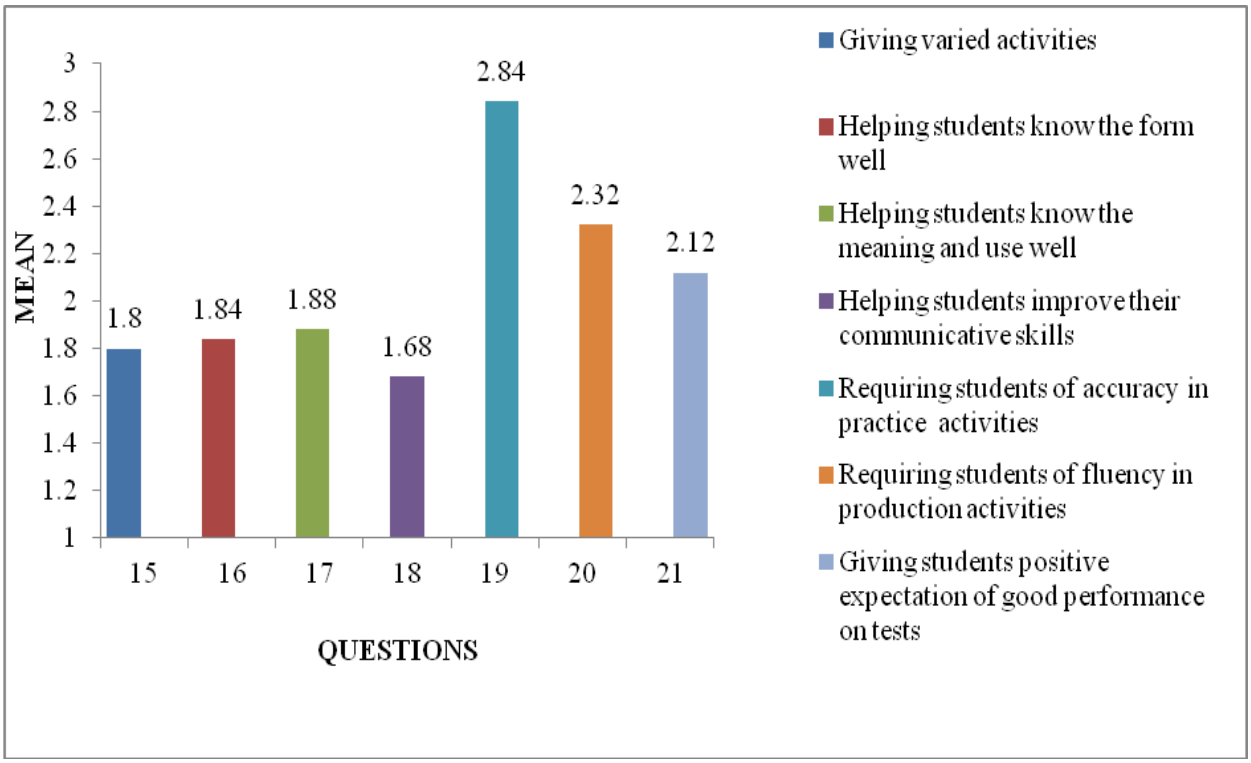

Chart 4. Students' attitudes towards task design in practice and production stages

The integration of context into the tasks in three stages (Presentation, Practice and Production) supported by the advocates of function - based grammar theory (Halliday, 1994; McCarthy, 2001) received acknowledgement of the students. Despite focusing on meaning and use, the trial method did reject the importance of form. This finding reinforced the suggestion of Butt et al. (1995). The inclusion of forms also satisfied the grammar-based examinations that Vietnamese education system strongly supported (Toan, 2013). Finally, the finding about students' communication skills would satisfy those who raised concerns about students' ability to use English to communicate in their real life (Phuong and Uyen, 2014).

5.2.3. Students' feelings after the lessons

As shown in Chart 5, except for the last item of *difficulty* (with the mean value of 2.52), the students expressed their feelings in positive emotional terms (M ranged from 1.48 to 2.08). They found the lessons *new* and *strange* (M = 1.52). Due to the innovation of the lessons, they felt *interested* (M = 1.6). Therefore, they became more *active* to participate in the activities (M = 1.48). With their enthusiastic participation, they asserted that they could *absorb* the lessons (M = 1.92) and *remember* the structure well (M = 2.08). These findings were in line with the comments of Ehrenworth and Vinton (2005) and (Ur, 1996) when the grammar points were presented, practiced and produced with the embedding of contexts into tasks.

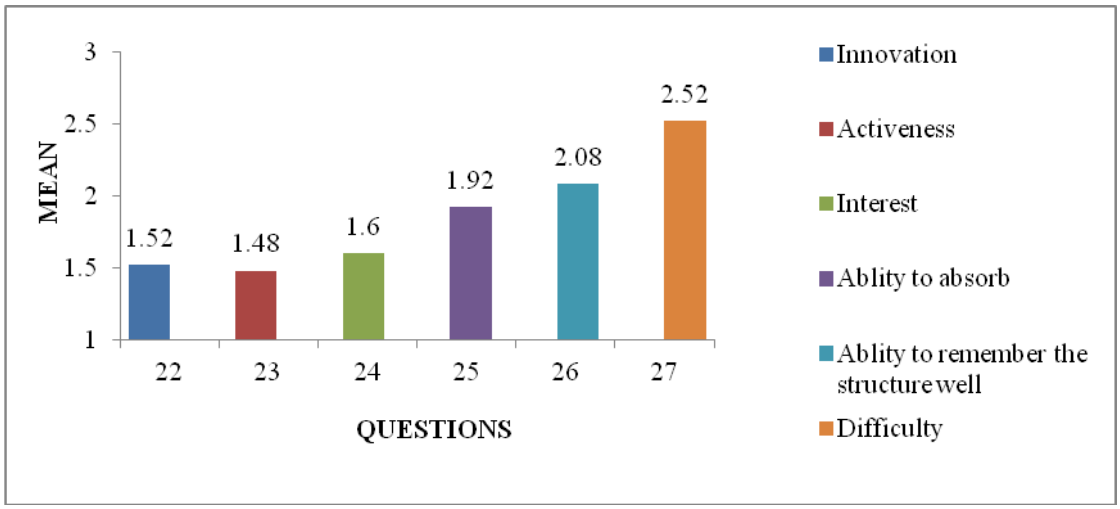

Chart 5. Students' feelings after the lessons

In brief, the students supported the trialed method with more positive than negative opinions on *the content, task design* and *feelings* after the lessons. As far as the *content* is concerned, except the theme *form*, the other themes such as *meaning* and *integration* highly met their satisfaction. Interestingly, they were satisfied with all the *tasks* designed in three stages. Finally, with respect to their *feelings* after four lessons, apart from the complaint about the factor of *challenge*, they were quite content with the lessons.

6. Conclusion

This research was undertaken with a purpose to create a pedagogical reform in English grammar teaching and learning. However, the intervention can only be obtained when there is a unification in both micro and macro levels, which involve high school teachers of English, textbook designers and policy makers who exert authority over the testing system.

For high school teachers of English, the teaching program and findings provide teachers of English in Vietnamese high schools with a specification of how to contextualize grammar tasks and how to conduct a grammar lesson in the constraints of their current condition. In preparation for a lesson, teachers can have recourse to communicative course books for authentic contexts in which the communicative purposes of the structure and the specific participants that the language aims at clearly emerge. They should design tasks in presentation, practice and production stages in the way that contextual components are taken into consideration and conduct them in the way that four skills, or at least the two skills of speaking and listening, are integrated.

Textbooks designers can relieve a burden from Vietnamese high school teachers if they redesign grammar tasks in English textbooks in a communicative way. To do this, they should consider the elements of *meaning* and *use* instead of *form* only in designing tasks. Instead of providing only mechanical exercises with isolated items, the textbook tasks should be contextualized.

However, English textbook writers will still underestimate the importance of communicative aspects until the testing system is given a significant overhaul. Due to the economic and technical constraints in the Vietnamese high school settings, listening and speaking tests will not be able to administered nationwide in the short run. However, the conventional test can be simply modified by contextualizing test items. If students are tested on skills to use the language rather than on a good memory of linguistic rules, testing can provide positive backwash effects on English teaching and learning■

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