



# An Inductive, Communicative Approach to Grammar Instruction in Secondary Schools in Macau and its Implications

Text • Photo | Ivan Cheong (張嘉偉)

**A**cquisition of knowledge generally occurs in two forms. One form is through explicit explanation, instruction and actions performed by others. The other form is that one's knowledge is acquired by people's own discoveries on the surroundings. Second-language acquisition also occurs, simply put, in the two forms mentioned above. To begin, I would like to say, without a doubt, that English teachers in Macau secondary schools have been putting enormous efforts on English instruction wherein grammar instruction has long been greatly emphasized (we can easily tell by looking at the ways students are evaluated in the tests or examinations in Macau), which indicates that we teachers have always been dealing with grammar instruction. Therefore, given that grammar is of such importance, we indeed have the responsibility to keep perfecting the methodology of teaching grammar. However, they are about teaching grammar in a very explicit way where rules are explained in very detailed ways, which can be called deductive approach.

(Inductive approach, on the contrary, contains extremely little or even no explicit explanation of rules about grammar.) We cannot deny the efficiency of the current approaches because we have seen improvement. Yet, that does not mean we should stop coming up with alternatives or stop perfecting what we have established to improve the current situations in Macau.

Grammar lessons are commonly considered boring among students in Macau, which is attributed to the fact that teachers are always the ones who speak for most of the class time, trying to explicitly explain the rules. Furthermore, it is also believed that, by students and teachers, grammar teaching seems to be occupying a substantial portion of the English curriculum, so that students would easily have a misunderstanding that English is mainly about rules and teachers' seemingly non-stop explanation of those rules. Thus, in this article, I am going to give my humble views on the current methodology of grammar instruction in Macau and refer to or draw our attentions on some ideas

or methods that have hardly been considered in Macau contexts.

Traditionally and contemporarily, English grammar has been taught deductively for decades in Macau wherein explicit explanation of the rules is of great emphasis. Furthermore, written exercises are widely and frequently utilized as a common practice for students to get familiar with the grammar items learnt. Nonetheless, most of the students are still a long way from reaching the satisfactory levels in using the target language orally, or in written assignments, whilst they can complete those written exercises without making serious flaws (some can provide the correct answers without understanding the contexts of the exercises, and that is the issue about textbook design, which will be briefly discussed in this article). Therefore, in terms of students' performance, what we are facing is a very disappointing and frustrating fact because we all know well that learning a language is not solely about memorizing the rules of it but being able to use the language for communicative purposes, namely textual *communication purposes* as well as oral communication purposes. The following questions are worth pondering over:

1. Is it possible to teach English Grammar inductively in Macau secondary schools?
2. Can English grammar be taught in a very communicative way in Macau secondary schools, in which oral tasks greatly replace the traditional written-exercises, aiming to 'killing two birds with one stone' (Students improve the Grammar knowledge as well as their oral proficiency spontaneously)?

Different people acquire a second-language in

different ways and at different paces yet there are some common features within their processes of the second-language acquisition. For instance, some learners would rather memorize utterances than analyze sentences; some would rather read to themselves more than use the language more. However, we should not overlook, in whatever ways of people learning a language, the fact that most of us, language learners, can unconsciously formulate rules about the particular languages we are dealing with though the rules might not be reliable at times. This claim might make us think about whether those rules would stay in our memories for long. It is believed that we (teenagers or adults) do have some experiences of formulating some rules when learning a language. For example:

- a. I like reading.
- b. She likes reading.
- c. He and she like reading.
- d. They like reading.
- e. Tom likes reading.
- f. We like reading.

The examples above try to partly illustrate how agreement in English sentence structure is achieved. Can students formulate rules about it by observing sentences by their own? (Inductive Approach) Or must there be teacher standing in the classroom having them explained over and over again? Is there only one way of teaching it? Shall teachers in Macau be braver to adopt that approach? According to Piaget & Inhelder (1969), children have the ability to formulate a rule in their minds and, once the rules are formulated, those rules will stay there for a long time.

Though their main interests are in first-language acquisition, yet, based on their claim, it is not a bad idea to try teaching grammar inductively to students as earlier as possible so as to foster their independent learning skills because grammar learning then would become a highly independent learning experience, also aiming to have the knowledge transferred into their long-term knowledge. One thing though, students' abilities vary, therefore, teachers' explanation of the rules is acceptable in instruction, which is then another alternative of teaching grammar, a blend of the old and new methods. It is definitely worth trying the inductive approach or the blend of inductive and deductive approach because we, so far, have not seen significant breakthrough from students' performance in the open proficiency tests or university admission examinations while they have been learning English deductively for many years. In the next paragraph, I will discuss some issues about the acquisition of simple rules and the complex rules of the English grammar.

According to Robinson (1996), complex rules are better mastered by inductive learning. In Macau, normally, schools start teaching complex English grammar rules from Form 2 or Form 3, such as relative clauses, adjectival clauses and adverbial clauses, the list goes on. Form 4 is normally the period where even more difficult grammar rules are dealt with. Thus, according to Robinson, it is better for students to start learning English grammar rules inductively in early stages of their studies in order to let students master the complex rules easily in inductive approach later on in higher forms in secondary schools. Compared

with secondary schools, primary schools in Macau could be a better place to adopt the inductive approach because those young students would have the opportunity to develop their analytical skills and to discover something on their own.

There are a lot of merits of using inductive approach to train students. According to Brown (2001), he suggests four points that are supporting the ideas of grammar being presented inductively in second-language instruction for learners:

- a. It is more in keeping with natural language acquisition (where rules are absorbed subconsciously with little or no conscious focus).
- b. It conforms more easily to the concept of interlanguage development in which learners progress through possible stages of rule acquisition,
- c. It allows students to get a communicative 'feel' for some aspect of language before getting possibly overwhelmed by grammatical explanation, and
- d. It builds more intrinsic motivation by allowing students to discover rules rather than being told them.

These four points are worth being explored to come up with certain suitable approaches that teachers can take in offering grammatical instruction. It also indicates that inductive approach in grammar lesson has great potential to let students gain great success.

It would be too idealistic to believe that all of the teachers in Macau are permitted or equipped well enough to use inductive approach solely to teach English grammar; however, if used properly, this approach would increase the degree of diversity

of students' learning and our teaching. More importantly, students can enjoy the opportunity to discover something on their own so that their willingness of searching and of solving problems on their own will be increased.

Can grammar be taught in a very communicative way? Yes, certainly! First of all, there are plenty of books displaying ways of teaching it communicatively, such as using oral tasks. Thus, suitable methods can be easily accessed using those books by teachers. Undeniably, written tasks should not be ignored completely because they do have their contribution for learners if used properly. However, the exercises in most of the textbooks used in Macau are not that sufficient. (One of the important reasons is that non-local publishers are the main suppliers of the textbooks used in Macau) As what I have mentioned earlier in this article, students can possibly 'guess' the answers without understanding the contexts. Thus, frequently completing the written exercises can easily make students take the risk of totally ignoring the communicative aspects of language learning. Oral tasks in grammar lessons are as important as those written tasks.

To sum up, given that grammar instruction is greatly emphasized and being paid a great deal of attention to in English learning in Macau, educators, teachers and curriculum planners, have the responsibility to keep perfecting the methodology of teaching it; when necessary, a change is worth being made. Another main issue discussed in this article is the possibility of bringing success to students by the highly-communicative grammar lessons students take. We should never put aside the fact that

language acquisition is tightly connected to the communicative aspects of using a language. Children at the very young ages like 4 or 5 can acquire a language without explicit input, which gives us some room to think about whether teenagers can have some advantages when learning grammar items in such a primitive way in Macau context. We should also bear in mind that, the inductive approach is actually an approach that was proposed long ago and has been established for a long time. The thing is that we educators sometimes lack of the ability or do not want to try something we have not tried before. 🌱

## References

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