

TEACHING GRAMMAR TO YOUNG LEARNERS: A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH EXAMPLE

Vu Thi Thanh Nha

*VNU University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University,
Hanoi, nhavtt@vnu.edu.vn*

ABSTRACT

Grammar has played a central position in language teaching and it has been changing significantly for the past few decades. At the era of post-method, teachers can select various classroom procedures and language content to meet the communication needs of the learners. One frequent question that teachers ask is how to teach grammar to young learners. Some argue that young learners should be exposed to a natural language environment and acquire language through activities. Others propose that explicit teaching of grammar is necessary for learners in non-native language environment. The controversies put language teachers in a challenging situation of continuously identifying what and how to teach. This paper focuses on some design principles for grammar teaching to young learners and classroom examples to support teachers' decisions in applying functional grammar effectively to young learners in Vietnamese contexts. It first critically examines theoretical controversies in grammar teaching, young learners, and the learning contexts. Then it presents examples of classroom activities as illustrations.

Key words: teaching methods; young learners; functional grammar; communicative language teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Grammar has a central role in language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Previously, teaching contents are organised around a grammar point of written texts. However, when teachers have diverted their teaching goals into developing speaking proficiency since mid-1950s, new approaches appear to prioritise oral forms of language, meanings, and contexts of the communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Examples of this approach are a family of communicative methods such as task-based language teaching or

situational approach (Thornburry, 2017). Grammar is still important in language learning as it is “a set of rules which govern how units of meaning may be constructed in any language” and “a learner who ‘knows grammar’ is one who has mastered and can apply these rules to express him or herself in what would be considered acceptable language forms” (Ur, 2009, p.4). However, Larsen- Freeman (2001, p.251) challenges this structural view of grammar, saying that “equating grammar with form and the teaching of grammar with the teaching of explicit linguistic rules concerning form are unduly limiting, representing what we have called myths”. She emphasizes the need to broaden the concept of grammar when we adopt learning-language-via-using approach and to change grammar teaching models.

Grammar teaching procedures are indeed changed from deductive instruction of rules in traditional decontextualised grammar lessons into inductive grammar lessons via communicative activities. This change seems to incur controversial issues. Larsen-Freeman (2001) observes an excessive focus on offering meaningful exposures to communicative activities in the hope that the students will pick up language forms. Unfortunately, this implicit learning principle does not appear to work well with older learners with analytical learning styles or in foreign language teaching environments where learners have limited opportunities to use the language (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, Le, 2011). Similarly, Nunan (2010, p.30) casts doubt on communicative language teaching as “they are not really ‘methods’ at all, in that they do not advocate a prescriptive set of procedures or classroom activities”. He argues that each method should be a “pedagogical package” that develops from theoretical perspectives, program goals, set of tasks and activities, learner’s and teacher’s roles, and materials.

English has become more popular in Vietnam curriculum. It has been introduced earlier in the curriculum. According to Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), 41 out of total 63 provinces in Vietnam introduced English to 24% of kindergarten children 57 out of total 63 provinces offered English to 12.5% year 1 and year 2 students (MOET, 2017). English is also the choice of the majority of school students. English, selected by 98% of school students (Vang, 2003, p.7), is officially taught as an additional language along with Chinese, Japanese, Russian, French, and German. However, English is considered as a foreign language in Vietnam. According to MOET statistics for school year 2018-2019, almost 83% of total primary students speak Vietnamese as their home language and about 17% students came from non-Vietnamese ethnic group (MOET, 2019). Students’ access to English comes mostly from their English classrooms, where most

students and teachers share Vietnamese as their mother tongue. At home, the majority of students use Vietnamese to communicate with family members.

This situation reflects pedagogical challenges for English teachers who work with young learners. For a start, most teachers are trained to teach English to older learners (in secondary or high schools). They have little guidance and experience in teaching methods to young learners. In addition, the introduction of 2018 English National Curriculum, is a new challenge to the teachers. They are expected to work with various textbooks, teaching principles, and classroom procedures instead of one national textbook as before. They have to make informed decision about what and how to teach. To overcome these challenges, this paper aims to help teachers understand current concepts of grammar, functional grammar teaching, and young learners' learning. Specific classroom examples are also presented as illustrations, not as a prescribed method for teachers. It is hoped that teachers themselves can develop a personal position of teaching grammar in order to be able to adopt appropriate classroom activities for their own contexts.

2. Key Concepts

This section examines theoretical controversies regarding the nature of grammar, grammar teaching approaches and the role of grammar teaching to young learners.

2.1. The nature of grammar

There is little consensus on what constitutes grammar as its definitions are based on the theories of language and language proficiency. Larsen-Freeman (2003) has listed eight different concepts of grammar. Richards and Rogers (2014) have presented seven types of grammar based on their theoretical views of language. In this paper, I will look at some common concepts of grammar: Traditional grammar, formal grammar, functional grammar, and pedagogical grammar.

Traditional grammar sees language as a set of rules which were originally taken from the written classical languages, Greek and Latin. Latin was thought to be a logical and organised language and so it was used as a basis to categorise or "codify" parts of speech (article, noun, verb, pronoun, conjunction) in a sentence. The students are asked to recognise and classify

the words in a sentence into the parts of speech to which they belong. This teaching approach is usually referred to as the grammar-translation method which focuses on exercises, drills, and translation of written texts. This approach to grammar is also referred as prescriptive and theoretical because they include standards of “usage that do not necessarily reflect the reality of how people use language” (Burns, 2011, p. 77). Similar to traditional grammar, structural grammar includes rules about morphology (word structures) and syntax (sentence structures) of English language instead of Latin. These two approaches are influenced by a structural model which views language as “a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning” (Richards & Rogers, 2014, p.23). Learners build up grammar knowledge about the syntax, or the components of the sentences (phrases, clauses, sentences) and how complex sentences are formed (questions, negatives, passives and so on) via imitation, reinforcement, and repetition. This grammar is also rule-governed and prescriptive.

Formal grammar is associated with the cognitive model and Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Accordingly, grammar, stored in our mind, is a collection of universal principles and distinctive parameters for each language. Learners do not analyse rules, they are exposed to actual language use to activate innate language acquisition devices (LAD). Audiolingualism, Direct Method, and the Natural Approaches, which follows formal grammar principles, all aim to provide inputs to activate the deep grammar structures “in the brain” (Derewianka, 2019, p.824). Classroom activities, therefore, has a greater focus on language exposure than on analysing grammar rules.

Functional grammar, on the other hand, goes beyond these structural phenomena. It analyzes language as the entire communicative situation, including the purpose of the speech event, its participants, its discourse context. “Functionalists maintain that the communicative situation motivates, constrains, explains, or otherwise, determines grammatical structures” (Nichols, 1984, p.97). It has a similar focus on real life language use as formal grammar, but it describes language use instead of analysing it based on prescribed grammar rules. In other words, functional grammar accepts various language uses that help to serve a social function. Classroom activities that are influence by functional grammar include communicative activities in which a language rule is used rather than learning multiple decontextualized grammar rules.

As grammar points are selected for the communication needs of the

learners, a recent concept of pedagogical grammar is used (Bourke, 2005). Bourke (2005) points out that “pedagogical grammar is more than unapplied knowledge in the head; it is the ability to exploit one’s grammatical resources in order to make meaning” (p. 96). It means pedagogical grammar is related to a teaching context and is required by learners to make meanings. Similarly, Burns (2011, p.84) has found that teaching grammar “at the point of need” is the most effective approach. The problem is that teachers will always have to decide when the learners need grammar to make meanings, before, during, or after a task.

The existence of various grammar concepts leads to controversies in the nature of grammar and how it should be taught. Firstly, grammar is considered as knowledge (rules) and it should be strictly followed to avoid inaccuracy. Teaching methods that focus on memorization and drills support this approach. Secondly, grammar is considered as an innate quality that can be activated through language exposure. Teaching methods, thus, are implicit and focus on providing language inputs and grammar is naturally activated. Finally, grammar is a language skill. Larsen-Freeman (2003) states:

“However, I think that it is more helpful to think about grammar as a skill rather than as an area of knowledge; this underscores the importance of students’ developing an ability to do something, not simply storing knowledge about the language or its use. I have coined the term *grammaring* (Larsen-Freeman, 1992) to highlight the skill dimension of grammar. I also find this term helpful in reminding us that grammar is not so fixed and rigid as the term *grammar* implies. It is far more mutable” (p.11)

As a skill, grammar is changable, functional and teachable. Teaching activities, therefore, should involve active language use to achieve a communicative purpose. Clearly, a concept of grammar is closely linked to an assumed way it should be taught.

2.2. Grammar teaching

Approaches to teach grammar are both influenced by the theoretical concepts of grammar and learning theories. They deal with some important questions regarding grammar teaching: 1) Should we teaching grammar? 2) What can be taught? and 3) How it can be taught? and When can it be taught? Like the variations in grammar concepts, they are “swings of the pendulum” (Le, 2011, p.33).

To respond to the first question, there are three positions. At one extreme, the non-interface position (Krashen,1985), believes that explicit grammar teaching does not lead to implicit grammar knowledge embedded in a one's communicative competence. It advocates for non-grammar focus instruction by providing comprehensible and rich inputs, but it tends to avoid explicit teaching of grammar rules. The interface position (DeKeyser, 1998), nevertheless, believes that explicit grammar instruction does lead to implicit grammar knowledge at some point. Between these two extremes is the weak interface position (Ellis, 1994) that has found a correlation between explicit grammar instruction and improved second language acquisition when suitable conditions are satisfied. Currently, there is abundant evidence to conclude that “instruction that leads to effective language learning includes a focus on grammar” (Burns, 2011, p.80).

When we decide that teaching grammar is necessary for language development, the argument turns to what to teach. Traditionally, grammar is associated with rules, and grammar teaching means activities that help students to memorise and apply the rules to analyse other written examples of standard English. When we adopt functional grammar, it expands to other forms of language (written and spoken language in use) to express meanings in a communicative context. For example, Larsen-Freeman (2001) proposes a three-dimension framework for teaching one grammar point, including forms, meanings, and usage (see Figure 1 and examples in table 1). These dimensions are interconnected and the “change any one wedge will have repercussions for the other two” (p. 252).

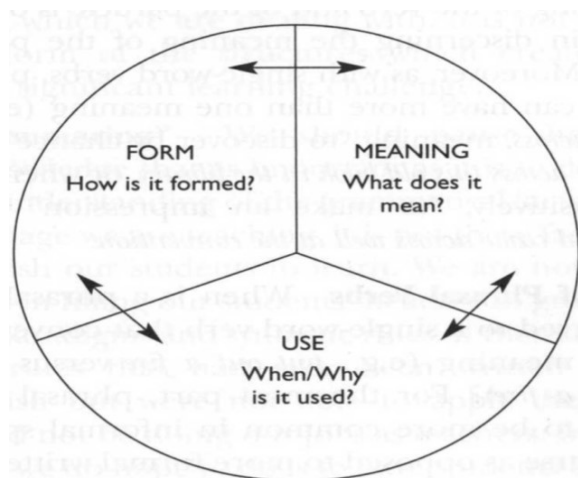


Figure 1. *Three-dimension grammar framework*
(Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p.252)

To illustrate the use of this framework, we can analyse teachable aspect of the verb *like*. As seen in Table 1, the connected change with different forms of the verb *like*. It can be seen that we can use it in several structures (form), meanings and contexts. The structure *like + noun(s)* changes into *like + V-ing* have similar meanings, but their use differs, the latter is more frequent in conversations about hobbies and leisure activities. *Would like + noun (s)*, however, is used for expressing a preference when making an order or responding to a request.

Table 1. Examples of a three-dimension grammar framework

Forms	Meanings	Use
Like + noun(s) I like tigers/I don't like tigers	To express likes or dislikes in general	To express opinions about things
Like + V-ing I like playing football/I don't like swimming	To express likes or dislikes in general	To talk about hobbies
Would like + noun(s) - Would you like something to drink? -Yes, I'd like a cup of coffee.	To express a preference	To make an order or respond to a request (e.g. in a restaurant)

Adopting this framework requires more diverse grammar activities, which may focus on each of the three aspects (form, meaning, and use) and practice time. That brings us to the third question of how grammar should be taught. There is a consensus that grammar should be integrated in communicative/content-based activities, which is influenced by functional approach as previously discussed. For example, Larsen-Freeman (2001) considers teaching grammar as a skill, or a "linguistic behavior that conforms to the rules, not knowledge of the rules themselves" (p.264). Taking a similar approach, Ur (2009) insists that grammar teaching should be integrated and differentiated in skill-based activities and the types of forms and meanings prioritised in each skill. She makes a clear distinction between the written and spoken forms for receptive or productive activities respectively (see table 2). Accordingly, there are different levels of 'learning' a grammar rule or a structure. Take the structure *like* as an example, the students should learn how the verb is pronounced and spelled. They also need to learn how to understand its meaning in listening and reading contexts, and learn how to say or write more examples using the verb.

Table 2. *Aspects of teaching/learning a structure (Ur, 2009, p.6)*

	Forms	Meanings
Listening	Perception and recognition of the spoken form of the structure	Comprehension of what the spoken structures means in context.
Speaking	Production of well-formed examples in speech	Use of what the written structure means in contexts.
Reading	Perception and recognition of written form	Comprehension of what the written structure means in contexts.
Writing	Production of well-formed examples of writing	Use of the structure to convey meanings in writing.

So far, we have agreed that some form of explicit grammar teaching that highlights forms, meanings and uses of a language point and that is combined with communication is necessary for students' language development. The last question to answer is when it can be taught. Two teaching options for teachers include isolated and integrated form-focused instruction (FFI) (Spada et al, 2014). It should be noted that both approaches involves drawing learners' attention to form and communicative activities. However, isolated form-focused instruction stresses on separated time for grammar instruction for learners to achieve "understanding" **before** engaging in "practice" (p.456) to reinforce the form later, a deductive learning process. Integrated FFI, nevertheless, draws learners' attention to form **within** communicative/content-based activities, an inductive learning process. Section 3 will suggest activities for these processes.

2.3. Teaching grammar to young learners

Research shows more evidence that young learners can deal with "activities that challenge their ability to **notice and think** about language" (Puchta, 2019, p.212). Similar teaching principles are applicable in most situations. Some cautions, however, are needed to choose activities and teaching approaches that are appropriate for their learning styles and cognitive competence. DeKeyser (2018, p.3) emphasises that good quantity and quality of input is what determines the outcomes. Nunan (2010) defines young learners as learners from 3 years of age to 15 (p. 2). In this paper, I

focus on young learners in primary schools (from 5 to 10). With this group, they have some distinctive characteristics as younger learners in Pinter (2006, as cited in Nunan, 2010):

- They are at beginning years of school.
- They have a holistic approach to language. They understand meaningful messages, but can not analyse language yet.
- They have low level of awareness about themselves as well as the learning process.
- They have limited reading and writing skills even in the first language.
- Generally, they are more concerned about themselves than others.
- They have limited knowledge about the world.
- They enjoy fantasy, imagination, and movement.

Given these characteristics, we should avoid structural methods that involve students in memorising decontextualised sentences (Puchta, 2018). Rather, we should select meaningful activities that can draw young learners' attention to form, but do not require a considerable amount of analysis and generalisation of prescribed grammar (see section 3).

3. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

This section introduces activities that are intended for teaching forms to young learners under the functional grammar approach. It is noted that young learners are developing their grammar knowledge and there's room to accept certain mistakes (Nunan, 2010; Puchta, 2018). I will briefly describe the activities to illustrate how a grammar point is integrated in a communicative activity. It is not intended as a comprehensive collection of classroom activities that follows the functional grammar approach.

3.1. Noticing language chunks

This activity provides opportunities for learners to notice how words are used in chunks, relatively fixed word phrases. One reason is that young learners start with simple language at a sentence level. Learning language chunks will provide them a valuable resource for developing grammar (Cameron, 2001; Puchta, 2019). They should notice "words inside chunks and how other words can be used in the same place" to have initial concept of structures (Cameron, 2001, p. 104). Songs and chants followed by some reconstructing activities are fun examples to help learners notice language

chunks. The following is a song “At a farm” from English Discovery 2 (National Education University, 2020, p.36). The purpose is to help learners to identify farm animals. They are put in a structure “It’s a...” and “Look at the....”.

Charlie: *Rose! It's a farm!*

Rose: *Look at the animals.*

Charlie: *Look Rose! It's a cow. It's black and white.*

Rose: *And look! It's a goat. It's brown.*

Charlie: *It's a duck.*

Rose: *Look at the hen.*

Charlie: *And the turkey!*

Rose: *Awww, a lovely sheep!*

Charlie: *What's this?*

Rose: *It's a grey horse.*

Charlie: *I love the farm!*

Rose: *Me too!*

The students can listen and learn the song by heart. They can also do restructuring activity by filling the gapped song with a missing word.

Another example can help students notice word order in a structure “I have got two hands” by using hand gestures. Each word is on one finger. Students listen and move their fingers when they hear the words. An alternative is ask them to write new sentences with picture cues on a hand-shape paper.

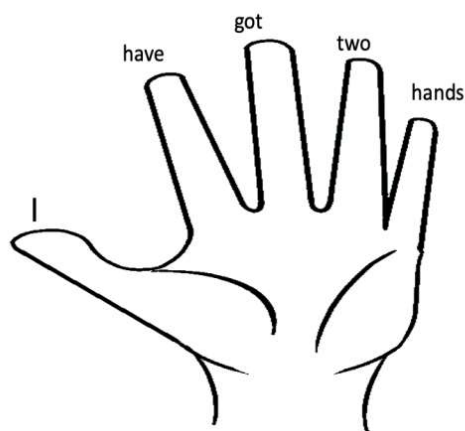


Figure 2. *Examples of using hand gestures for learning grammar*

3.2. Noticing functional values

This type of activity does not present grammar rules to learners, but can draw their attention to forms. Puchta (2019) gives an example of noticing functional values of -s in nouns:

Plural -s has functional value: if you have two pictures, one showing one apple and the other six, and you say to your learners 'Point to the apples', then in order to point to the right picture the students need to understand the meaning of the plurality marker -s as against no -s ('Point to the apple'). N.B. This looks like an extremely important principle that could lead to the creation of a range of incidental focus-on-form-based activities, perfect for very young and beginner learners (p. 211).

Another example is an activity that requires learners to match the comparative and superlative forms of tall to the right object in the pictures. In order to do this, learners should understand the meaning of -er, and -est when they are added to adjectives. Teachers can demonstrate the activities to present the meanings before asking them to match.



Figure 3. Using pictures to help learners to notice functional values of the structure

3.3. Comprehensible inputs

This type of activity is closely related to noticing. Learners are exposed to rich language input such as a story, a chant, or a song that contains the grammar point to get themselves familiarised understood before learning it. For example, to introduce the structure "I have got" teachers can draw a monster on the board and describe it "I have got two eyes. I have got three arms, I have got four legs. I have got 3 fingers". Then teachers can ask

students to listen and point to the pictures. She continues to say the sentences. These activities provide examples for the structure and can help them understand the meaning. The students can also hear the form of the structure before they can actually make new sentences.

3.4. Collaborative output tasks

With young learners, inputs are important. They will provide exemplars and illustrations about how the grammar works. It is, however, argued that understanding inputs is not adequate for producing accurate forms (Ur, 2009; 2011; Puchta, 2019). Therefore, collaborative output tasks such as collaborative dictogloss are necessary. The teacher reads a poem to learners, asks them to rewrite it, compare it with a partner and read it back to her. She will write it down on the board and they check it together.

Table 3: Grammar activity with dictogloss (Puchta, 2019, p.216)

She likes chocolate she likes music she likes good movies but she doesn't like two things: unfair people and lies.	_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ but _____ d _____ _____ _____ : _____ and _____ .
--	--

Later, she involves the class into a deletion activity and gradually deletes words on the board. The learners have to reconstruct the poem orally. Finally, they can think of a person they know and write a similar poem, using the same structure.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined some competing issues in teaching grammar, including grammar concepts and approaches to teaching grammar. It has argued that current practices use a functional concept of grammar that include interconnected elements of forms, meanings, and use. Learning grammar is a complex process to develop appropriate linguistic behaviors (listening, reading, speaking, writing) for meaningful communication. It requires some form-focused instruction that is appropriate for learners' learning needs. The paper also analyses young learners' characteristics as a

basis to select appropriate classroom activities. It is hoped that teachers will be able to understand, explain, and adopt appropriate classroom activities for their own young learners. As the paper focuses more on understanding teaching principles, it does not provide a prescribed set of activities that can directly go to a specific classroom. This is the “food-for-thought” to help school teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices. We believe that it is teachers’ beliefs, experience, and professional judgement of their own learners that have vital roles in designing and conducting effective grammar lessons. As Larsen-Freeman (2015, p.275) puts it, this is to “challenge teachers to think differently, to experiment with new practices, and to help them make the tacit explicit by cultivating new ways of talking about their practice”.

Word count: 4500

REFERENCES

- Bourke, J. M. (2005). The grammar we teach. *Reflections on English language teaching*, 4, 85-97.
- Burns, A., (2011). Grammar and communicative language teaching: why, when, and how to teach it. *English Language Teaching Practice in Asia, Phnom Penh: IDP Education*, 75-85.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DeKeyser, R. (1998). Beyond focus on form: Cognitive perspectives on learning and practising second language grammar. In C. Doughty & J. Willaims (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp.42-63). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- DeKeyser, R. M. (2018). Age in learning and teaching grammar. *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*, 1-6.
- Derewianka B. (2019) A Relevant Pedagogic Grammar for Today’s Classrooms. In: Gao X. (eds) *Second Handbook of English Language Teaching*. Springer International Handbooks of Education. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02899-2_43
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. (2011). Seeking a justification for skill-building. *KOTESOL Proceedings 2011*, 1320.
- MOET (2017). Report on 3-year implementation of Kindergarten English program (*Báo cáo đánh giá 03 năm triển khai cho trẻ mẫu giáo làm quen với tiếng Anh*). MOET, Hanoi.
- MOET (2019). Statistics for primary education in school year 2018-2019. <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-tieu-hoc.aspx?ItemID=6632> Last access 20th December, 2020.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2001). Teaching grammar. *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, 3, 251-266.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Boston, MA: Thomson/Heinle.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015). Research into practice: Grammar learning and teaching. *Language Teaching*, 48(2), 263-280. doi:10.1017/S0261444814000408
- Le, V.C. (2011). Form-focused instruction: A case study of Vietnamese teachers' beliefs and practices. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Hamilton, NZ: University of Waikato.
- National Education University (2020). *English Discovery 2*. (Pupil's Book). Hanoi. National Education University Press.
- Nichols, J. (1984). *Functional Theories of Grammar*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13(1), 97-117. doi:10.1146/annurev.an.13.100184.000525
- Nunan, D. (2010). *Teaching English to young learners*. Anaheim University.
- Puchta, H. (2019). Teaching grammar to young learners. S. Garton and F. Copland, *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young Learner*, 203-220.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Spada, N., Jessop, L., Tomita, Y., Suzuki W., Valeo A. (2014). Isolated and Integrated form-focused instruction: Effects on different types of L2 knowledge. *Language Teaching Research*. 18(4):453-473. doi:10.1177/1362168813519883

- Thornbury, S. (2017). *Scott Thornbury's 30 language teaching methods* Google EBook: *Cambridge handbooks for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ur, P. (2009). *Grammar Practice Activities: A Practical Guide for Teachers* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Ur, P. (2011), "Grammar Teaching" , in E. Hinkel (2011) *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (ed.) Abingdon: Routledge. Accessed 14 Feb 2021 , Routledge Handbooks Online.
- Vang, N. X. (2003). English language teaching in Vietnam today: Policy, practice and constraints. In W. K. Ho, Y. L. Wong, H.W. Kam, & R. Wong (Ed.), *English Language Teaching in East Asia Today* (pp. 455-474). Singapore: Times Media Private Limited.