

THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN TRAINING TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

*Iulia IGNATIUC,
Alec Russo State University of Bălți*

“Grammar is back” (David Crystal).

Rezumat: Există un număr mare de lucrări, în care sînt analizate rolul și locul gramaticii în predarea limbilor străine, diferite procedee și activități care pot contribui la realizarea cu succes a procesului de predare și la creșterea interesului studenților față de însușirea gramaticii limbii străine. Și totuși acest succes depinde, în mare măsură, de convingerile profesorilor și deciziile luate de ei. Practicile de predare demonstrează că nu există o singură metodă care ar putea fi numită cea mai efektivă în predarea limbilor străine. Susținem că, în procesul de predare a limbilor străine, e absolut necesar să ne concentrăm asupra celor trei dimensiuni gramaticale: forma, conținutul și uzul. Acest lucru cere contextualizarea gramaticii, fapt care i-ar ajuta pe studenți să utilizeze corect structurile gramaticale.

Cuvinte-cheie: formă, uz, deprindere, studiere conștientă, context, structuri gramaticale, dimensiuni gramaticale.

Abstract: The present article attempted to reveal some beliefs about the role of grammar and grammar instruction in teacher training institutions. There are numerous works devoted to the role and place of grammar in foreign language teaching, different techniques and activities that contribute to making the teaching more successful and enjoyable. However the success depends on the teachers' beliefs and decisions. Teaching practices show that there is no single method that could be called the best in teaching foreign languages. We believe that in teaching foreign languages we should focus on both, form and use as we should integrate the study of language with that of language in use.

Key-words: grammar, training, technique, success.

⁹²University of Warwick, *Course Specifications: Glossary of Terms relating to Course Specifications*, 2004 // <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/institute/info/quality/coursespecs/view/glossary/>

⁹³Warlick, David, *Literacy and Learning in the 21st Century* // <http://www.slideshare.net/dwarlick/literacy-learning-in-the-21st-century>

Nothing else in foreign language teaching has caused so many discussions as the question of how to teach grammar. The long dominating analytic grammar-translation approach was strongly opposed in the last decades of the XX-th century by the direct method focused on use. The appearance of the communicative method divided the educators into those who thought grammar was necessary in foreign language teaching/learning and those who were against it. While in the West the opposition was very strong, in Moldova it was weaker. Though there were attempts to exclude grammar from teaching foreign languages this position was much weaker. It looks as if the teaching of grammar in teaching foreign languages has always been favored by Moldovan teachers. However their opinions on how to teach grammar vary greatly. The number of those who insist on teaching the rules and the forms only and on students memorizing them is regretfully not too small.

Thus the question of the role of grammar in foreign language teaching in Moldova is not an outmoded one. It is especially important in teacher training universities where students are the teachers of tomorrow. Teaching practices show that there is no single method that could be called the best in teaching foreign languages. We believe that we should focus on both, form and use as we should integrate the study of language with that of language in use. We start from the assumption that grammar, like reading, writing and speaking, is a skill which means that the student should be able to use grammar items in practice, i.e., be able to communicate successfully. And, as it is mentioned in the Preface to *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning and Use* (Series director - Diane Larsen-Freeman) "...a major means to this end is to teach students to use grammatical structures"⁹⁴. This will help them learn grammar dynamically, in the process of communication and not statically. Such an approach will wash away the boring atmosphere in grammar teaching/learning and the process will become an enjoyable one.

When we decide how to teach grammar in EFL, what exactly and how much of it, we should very carefully consider the objectives and how they meet the students' needs. In a teacher training program we train future teachers who will enter the job market well equipped with the necessary knowledge, abilities and skills. Thus the role of grammar in this kind of program is essential and cannot be diminished. Foreign language students should not only learn the grammatical material and know all the rules, they should be able to explain and analyse grammar items and answer their future pupils' questions.

Even though most foreign language students realize this, to many of them grammar is a boring subject that means learning by heart and memorizing. It is therefore the teacher's very important task to interfere and persuade his students that they will succeed in acquiring the foreign language and in learning how to teach it only when they know its grammar that is the backbone of language. He should be able to illustrate how grammar can provide learners with the necessary structures so that they can organize and express their messages. This is important for this category of students because they are not trained only to become good users of a foreign language. They undoubtedly need to master the language but as future teachers they need to learn the terminology and get into the essence of grammatical items. The teacher's arguments should be interesting and convincing. For example, the teacher may try to prove how important it is to be able to make the right choice between the infinitive and the ing-form after certain verbs. To do it he may analyse the two sentences:

a) *He stopped smoking.*

b) *He stopped to smoke.*

The students learn in (a) that smoking is given up while in (b) that the person makes a pause to perform the act of smoking.

The students' attention should be also drawn to the semantic difference between *stop* in (a) and *stop* in (b).

Examples in which Romanian and Russian speaking learners very often make mistakes in placing words in the sentence could be very helpful here. Thus in English, the adverb *very much* follows the verb and the object.

He likes coffee very much.

In Russian, it is usually placed before the verb predicate: *Он очень любит кофе.*

In Romanian, it may precede the verb-predicate or follow it or the object:

Foarte mult îmi place cafeaua.

Îmi place cafeaua foarte mult.

Îmi place foarte mult cafeaua.

Examples with Romanian and Russian Dative (both of nouns and pronouns) are also worth being used by teachers to convince the students of the urgent necessity to consciously learn the grammar of the language as in English it will always correspond to the Common/Nominative case of nouns/pronouns.

I am cold.

He likes French.

Îmi este frig.

Lui îi place franceza.

Мне холодно.

Ему нравится французский.

These structures constitute a source of mistakes for learners of English whose native language is Romanian or Russian. Impersonal sentences also add to the problems Romanian and Russian speaking learners of English have to face. "Weather sentences" have a subject (it) in English that is an analytical language while in Romanian and Russian, representatives of synthetic languages, they don't:

It is getting dark. /Se întuneacă. /Темнеет.

In Romanian and Russian existential sentences the adverb of place precedes the verb-predicate:

În curte sînt mulți copii. /Во дворе много детей.

In English, this adverb will be placed at the end of the sentence:

There are a lot of children in the yard.

These are only a few of the examples that point to the striking differences between English, on the one hand, and Romanian and Russian, on the other hand, that can help to make students realize the great importance of learning grammar items.

When we have to teach some new material we must think of how to introduce it. There are various ways of introducing the material but the most important thing is to provide context and exposure to real language and real situations. This means that grammar should be contextualized and thus it will allow the teacher to develop students' awareness of the form, meaning and use. Marianne Celce-Murcia and Sharon Hilles point out how important it is to integrate form, meaning and content in syllabus design [2, p. 19]. Diane Larsen-Freeman very thoroughly analyzed the above mentioned three dimensions of grammar: form, meaning and use and emphasized the idea that context gives the possibility to synthesize them [4, p. 21]. If the teacher focuses on form, meaning and use he will help the students achieve formal accuracy and get skilled in using grammatical structures meaningfully and appropriately.

The creation of contexts when teaching grammar is of particular importance under the circumstances we teach future teachers as the students practically have no opportunities to go to an English speaking country to practice the language. In this case we have to deal with a "non-language environment" contrary to the "language environment" where a foreign language is learnt in the country where this language is spoken. In such an environment the general context is provided. But even there, in class, teachers have to create micro contexts necessary to teach a certain grammar item. We are more successful when the grammar exercises and activities are supplemented by authentic texts that contain the target grammatical forms. That is why students best of all learn the English tenses and how to use them in communication when natural contexts are used. The English articles are also highly depended forms and only the context will tell us which article should be used in a certain situation.

⁹⁴Thewlis, S. *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning and Use* (Series director – Diane Larsen-Freeman), Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 1993, P. 3.

The next thing we should take care of is to decide whether the grammatical information we offer the students should be explicit or implicit. A grammar item may be introduced either in one way or another but there cannot be one single way. When we make the decision we take into account the character of the grammatical item, the students' level and other factors. In our classroom, we most often choose the explicit way of teaching grammar. Even if some material is introduced implicitly it will be later explained explicitly. This is for the students to consciously acquire the material and learn how things are explained in grammar. At a lower level we often teach grammar using speech patterns. Afterwards the grammar will be explained and the students will learn the necessary rules.

Based on my experience of teaching English as a foreign language and on my own experience of learning two foreign languages I dare say that grammar should be studied systematically. The importance of this thesis is proved by the resolution of ATEG: "Therefore, be it resolved that The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar recognize the value of systematic grammar study for teachers and students through pedagogies that promote not only the conscious knowledge of language structure but also an awareness of how language works"⁹⁵. We should not be afraid of conducting regular and formal lessons that are suitable for foreign language students who are trained to be teachers and should possess the knowledge that will be necessary when they face their own students and have to answer their questions in class. We should neither be afraid of teaching some difficult items of grammar out of context, that is, in isolation, "...before students can do interesting things with them"⁹⁶.

There are numerous works devoted to the role and place of grammar in foreign language teaching; there are different techniques and activities that contribute to making the teaching more effective and interesting. However the success depends on the teachers' beliefs and decisions as they are "active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs" [1, p. 97].

Thus we have attempted to reveal some beliefs based on personal knowledge built from experience about the role of grammar and grammar instruction in teacher training institutions.

References:

1. Borg, S. *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching: A Review of Research on What Language Teachers Think, Know, Believe, and Do.* //Language Teaching 36(2) 2003, 18 p. www.education.leeds.ac.uk/modx/assets/files/staff/papers/borg-LT-36-2-2003.pdf.
2. Celce-Murcia, M. and Hilles S. *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, 16 p.
3. Crystal, D. *Rediscover Grammar*, London, Longman, 2004, 254 p.
4. Larsen-Freeman, D. *Teaching Grammar// Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 1991, 17 p.