

TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR IN PRIMARY CLASSES
PREDAREA GRAMATICII ENGLEZE ÎN CLASELE PRIMARE

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Abstract

Gramatica este considerată unul dintre cele mai dificile aspecte în procesul studierii unei limbi străine. Cu toate acestea, gramatica trebuie percepută ca un mijloc de însușire temeinică a limbii străine, și nu ca un scop în sine. Acest aspect este important, în special, în ciclul primar, când procesul de însușire a limbii străine este în fază incipientă, iar calitatea acesteia condiționează întregul proces de învățare a limbii străine. Or, cunoașterea regulilor gramaticale este, fără îndoială, esențială pentru stăpânirea unei limbi străine, deoarece este puțin să știi vocabularul; este mult mai important să cunoști modalitățile în care acest vocabular poate fi asamblat pentru a exprima idei.

Nu există o modalitate universală de predare a gramaticii, în special a limbii străine; din acest motiv, profesorii încearcă să utilizeze diverse metode și tehnici: atât clasice, cât și moderne. Oricare ar fi metodele, profesorul trebuie să organizeze procesul de instruire astfel, încât elevii claselor primare să nu fie plictisiți, ci să conștientizeze regulile gramaticale în mod intuitiv, prin activități comunicative etc.

"English doesn't borrow from other languages. English follows other languages down dark alleys; knocks them over and goes through their pockets for loose grammar!"

– Author unknown

"Grammar is the logic of speech, even as logic is the grammar of reason."

Richard C. Trench

Language is the chief means by which people express themselves and fulfil the basic need for social interaction with other persons. Modern linguists are convinced that the language itself functions thanks to its skills. It is precisely this fact that explains the way we choose various words and models in speech. The Com-

mon European Framework presents a variety of communicative language competences to be present in language teaching, and one of them is “*grammatical competence*”, that is *the ability to recognize and produce the distinctive grammatical structures of a language and to use them effectively in communication*.

If we ask pupils what they hate most in their FL classes the most probable answer will be: GRAMMAR. It seems at first to be something very intricate and sophisticated developing the following skills: the ability to make up sentences correctly, to reproduce the text adequately; i.e. the development of practical skills and habits; the knowledge of the specific grammar structure helps pupils point out the differences between the mother tongue and the target language; and abilities to abstract numerous facts. Knowledge of grammar adds to pupils’ ability to control what they read and write. Grammar is essential to the study of foreign languages as it enhances language progress and is obligatory in all contemporary syllabuses. Although children come to school with an implicit knowledge of how to use their native language, they cannot explain how it operates, or comprehend the terminology. This explicit knowledge of the grammar of the language, provided by teaching, allows learners to improve their reading, writing and speaking, and thus improve their conversational and literacy skills. Teachers often consider grammar instruction as controlled and old-fashioned, but the teaching of proper grammar is a way of speeding the learning process, by giving pupils the tools to facilitate producing ‘correct’ English. There are many reasons for learning and understanding grammar. Many countries create education policies to teach at least one foreign language at primary and secondary school levels. Being one of the main vital aspects in learning a FL, it is the foundation how to use and arrange correctly the acquired vocabulary in a sentence. That is why teaching grammar and accuracy of statements, as well as recognition of grammatical forms in speech and writing, occurs through the formation of grammatical skills since an early age. Teaching young learners is different from teaching adults. Young children tend to change their mood quite frequently, and they often find it extremely difficult to sit still. On the other hand, they show a greater motivation than adults to do things they like. In primary school the teachers should be very careful what grammar terms they operate with, so that they do not seem very sophisticated to their pupils.

Noam Chomsky affirmed there was a universal grammar hardwired into the brain of all humans, all human languages had evolved on top of that universal grammar, and that children learned their native languages using the universal grammar as a support structure [2]. One of the main impetuses for the growth of a modern theory of universal grammar is the question of *how early language learners know that certain phrases are ungrammatical*. Children acquire language by listening to native speakers around them. Universal grammar does not attempt to lay out many comprehensive statements that are true for every single language on Earth. However, there are many other opinions about grammar acquisition. We acquire more grammar as we learn our native tongue naturally. Things are different in terms of acquiring a foreign language, because of insufficient exposure to a FL environment: natural (being in the country where it is spoken) or artificial (in the classroom). The human brain is a pattern-recognition machine and it seeks out patterns in everything, so *grammar is the study and use of language patterns*. Children learn spoken grammar by recognizing and duplicating patterns of speech without knowing how to describe or analyze what they are doing – they just do it. Mastering grammar frequently causes difficulties; that is why teachers need use a greater number of communicatively-oriented training exercises aiming at improving pupils’ communicative competence. Unfortunately teaching grammar is often limited to laconic tables, grammatical constructions to be memorized, monotonous, and sometimes rather boring types of exercises. Since some teachers do not always suggest alternate activities, young pupils get bored and become passive, which complicates their learning process. As pedagogical practices demonstrate, in order to motivate pupils and show them the significance of mastering the grammar rules for the successful development of FL, the activities should be at least entertaining and interesting. Studying the experience of some English teachers shows that, in the process of learning grammar several stages can be distinguished. It is necessary to construct a system of exercises, since only adequately worked out exercises that take into account learners’ psychological characteristics and pedagogical principles can guarantee good grammar acquisition. Teaching grammar has always been in the foreground of the foreign language teacher’s attention. As Adriana Vizental states “what went wrong with traditional teaching was the fact that teachers focused exclusively on vocabulary and grammar and ignored the complex network of skills, the functional capacity of the Language, and the interactive nature of communication.... The language skills are taught in an integrated way. However, the teaching of language functions cannot replace the teaching of the language itself: for correct and thorough acquisition of the language, the lexical patterns and grammar structures need to be studied and practiced in isolation [9,177]”.

Teaching grammar has a major influence in syllabus and course-book design, for many classroom activities, a parameter for measuring accuracy and success in the process of language learning and an important part

of the examination system in the Republic of Moldova. Nowadays, there is much more to say about grammar teaching and learning, as most teachers consider modern perspectives on grammar acquisition. A good command of English as is envisaged by the school syllabus cannot be ensured without the study of grammar. Pupils need grammar to be able to listen, speak, read, and write in the target language. According to David Crystal, *grammar* "is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. The more we are aware of how it works, the more we can monitor the meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use language. It can help foster precision, detect ambiguity, and exploit the richness of expression available in English. And it can help everyone—not only teachers of English, but teachers of anything: for all teaching is ultimately a matter of getting to grips with meaning [3, 26]". Scott Thornbury, in turn, outlines criteria for grading the grammar syllabus in terms of importance and includes *complexity*, *learnability* and *teachability* where: *complexity* is the most important. He states "an item is complex if it has a number of elements, the more elements – the more complex it is"; *learnability* is traditionally measured by the level of complexity, while *teachability* is the level of ease a grammatical item is to introduce which means that it is usually introduced early in a language course [9, 9-10].

In primary classes the main factor of forming pupils' reproductive grammar skill is their need to learn the lexis of the language. Teachers must be sure that their pupils are aware of the vocabulary they need at their level and they can use the words in order to form their own sentence that contains a grammar structure. The mastering the grammar skill lets pupils save time and strength, energy, which can give opportunity to create. We can affirm that the English textbooks used in primary classes in Moldova correspond to these criteria.

There are various ways to teach grammar. For example, *explicit grammar instruction* involves teacher explanations of grammar in prescriptive or descriptive ways. It encourages direct methods of teaching grammar which offer the students evident examples and lists of rules. Within this perspective, the focus is placed on grammar drills which are aimed at teaching mechanical habit formation in learning hoping that the students will ultimately be able to move from simple repetition to open self-expression. Error correction is also significant here. Herron C. & Tomasello M. found that error repetition diminished greatly when errors were explicitly corrected [5].

Another group of researchers claim that no instruction is needed to learn grammar as *grammar should be learned deductively*: it aims to imitate without placing any emphasis on mechanical drills or explicit grammar instruction. Many scholars, while approving of this perspective as the most natural way of acquiring grammar, have also recognized its weakness. J. Aski, for example, noted that although immersion education might encourage fluency in speaking and communicating, it tends to fall short in the area of grammar acquisition. On the other hand, other teachers have also noted that learners who are taught explicit structures have difficulties reaching high levels in comprehension and communicative fluency, mainly because they memorized without understanding [1, 59]. At the same time Krashen argues that grammar instruction has only a fragile and peripheral effect [6].

Other researchers stick to the idea that grammar teaching should *combine instruction with communication*. This viewpoint, which is currently the mostly widely accepted, involves a movement through a hierarchy of grammar exercises which are classified according to their functions: *mechanical drills*, *meaningful drills*, and *communicative drills*. Mitchell affirms that communicative grammar teaching should be:

1. *Planned and systematic*, driven by a strategic vision of eventual desired outcomes;
2. *Rough tuned*, offering learners at slightly different stages a range of opportunities to add increments to their grammar understanding;
3. *Little and often*, with much redundancy and revisiting of issues;
4. *Supported and embedded in meaning-oriented activities and tasks*, which give immediate opportunities for practice and use [7].

Thus, communicative grammar teaching may involve: acceptance of classroom codes-switching and mother tongue use, at least with beginners; text based, problem-solving grammar activities implemented to develop learners' active, articulated knowledge about grammar; active corrective feedback and elicitation which promotes learners' active control of grammar. There are many different ways, which do not only involve the transmission of grammar rules. One of the models has five components: *lead-in*, *elicitation*, *explanation*, *accurate reproduction*, and *immediate creativity*.

The English textbooks for primary classes in Moldova designed for lower proficiency levels use a specified sequence of grammatical topics as their organizing principle. The classroom activities reflect quite well the grammar points that are being introduced or reviewed. The authors of the textbooks have developed activities that relate the topical discourse to meaning and form, providing oral or written input that addresses the topic. They review the point of grammar, using examples from the material, asking pupils to practice the grammar

issue in communicative drills that focus on the topic, etc.

To use textbook grammar exercises effectively, teachers need to recognize which type they are, devoting enough time to them, and supplementing them as needed. The textbook for the 4th form contains a large variety of grammar exercises, colourful, attractive pictures and accessible, well-thought tasks. There are many *recognition exercises* that are the easiest type of exercises for pupils to perform. They observe the grammar item in structures (sentence patterns) when hearing or reading. Since pupils only observe the new grammar item the situations should be natural and communicative. It is good that formed sentences involve real situations and facts. Pupils should read the sentences and find the signals for the correct choice of the form. Since the needed form is suggested in each sentence they should only recognize the one they need for a given context. Recognition exercises are indispensable as pupils retain the grammar material through auditory and visual perception. *Drill exercises* are more completed as they require reproduction on the part of the pupils, because the learners cannot assimilate the material if they only hear and see it. The more often they say it the better they assimilate the material. The textbook contains *repetitive drill* exercises, during which pupils pronounce the sentence pattern after the teacher, imitating her, both individually and in unison; *substitution drill* exercises, when pupils substitute the words or phrases in a sentence pattern (the advantage in performing this type of exercises is that pupils consolidate the grammar item without thinking about it. They think of the words, phrases, but not of the form itself, therefore, involuntary memory is at work); and *completion drill* exercises, during which the pupils complete the sentences the teacher utters looking at the pictures he shows. *Creative exercises* (*speech exercises*) are the most difficult type of exercises as it requires creative work on the part of the learners. These are: *making statements* either on the picture the teacher shows, or on objects; *asking questions* with a given grammar item; *speaking about the situation* offered by the teacher; *speaking on a suggested topic*; *making dialogues* using the grammar item covered; *translating into English*; and *participating in free conversation* in which pupils are to use the grammar item they have learned. Such exercises are designed for consolidating the grammar material pupils need for hearing and speaking.

Teaching English grammar can be hard both for the teachers and the pupils. To make learning grammar easier teachers are advised to use songs, rhymes and games. Games and problem-solving activities, which are task-based and have a purpose beyond the production of correct speech, are the examples of the most preferable communicative activities. Moreover, games have the advantage of allowing the pupils to practice vocabulary, grammar and structures extensively. While playing, the pupils are focused on the activity and end up absorbing the language subconsciously, as fun learning games usually contain repetition, which allows the language to stick. Learning games are entertaining, challenging, highly motivating, as well as allowing meaningful use of the language in context. Experienced teachers know, for example, it is a mistake to play a speaking game immediately after the new grammar has been presented. Ideally reading, spelling and writing games come after the new grammar has been absorbed and the students can use it orally.

Our pupils need grammar to be able to speak, and write in the target language. Teachers' aim is to form grammar skills and prevent children from making grammar mistakes in their speech, to develop pupils' skills in order to understand speech and participate in conversation. "The idea of grammar is imbedded in larger goals, namely being able to understand texts, to communicate effectively and to understand situations new to the students. Grammar is never the end product; it is always a tool for further use [4]".

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