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VOL. XIX



CONTENTS

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VOLUME XIX

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IV. REVIEWS

J. Alan Pfeiffer (Hrsg.), Studien zur Grammatik des Deutschen (Andrzej Z. ADAMSKI)	149
Marianne Löschmann, Vom Leseprozess (Krzysztof MYCZKO)	151
R. E. Horn, The Structure of the English Verb (Jan KOZŁO)	154
L. Hoffmann, Konstruktionsgrammatik (Barbara SKOWRON)	159
S. W. Anderson, Zur fachsprachlichen Aus- und Weiterbildung (Barbara SKOWRON)	162



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CONTENTS

I. ARTICLES

Harald HELLMICH, Funktion, Gestaltung und Einsatz des Lehrbuchs im Fremdsprachenunterricht für Fortgeschrittene 5

Dieter STEIN, Sprachtheorie und Übersetzungsfehler — Prolegomena zu Empirie und Theorie einer Fehleranalyse im Bereich der Übersetzungswissenschaft 23

Elżbieta ZAWADZKA, Die Neuropsychologie und der Sprach- bzw. Fremdsprachengebrauch 41

Klaus-Dieter MATZ, Ausgewählte Aspekte zur weiteren Entwicklung und Vertiefung des Problemverständnisses der Fremdsprachenpsychologie 53

Stanisław P. KACZMARSKI, Foreign Language Teaching Materials in the Framework of a Bilingual Approach 71

Aleksandra JANKOWSKA, The Advanced Students' Motivation for Explicit Learning of Grammar 85

Alicja PISARSKA, Translation Didactics and Foreign Language Teaching 95

II. NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

Janusz KRZYŻYŃSKI, Folk Linguistics and Its Influence on the Attitudes and Motivation of Learners of English as a Foreign Language 107

Jolanta MYDLARCZYK, An Experiment in Suggestopedic Teaching of English 115

III. REVIEW ARTICLES

Barbara LEWANDOWSKA-TOMASZCZYK, Interlingual and Intertextual Relationships in a Theory of Translation — review of: Gideon Toury. In Search of a Theory of Translation 127

Józef DARSKI, Deutsche Grammatik für Ausländer? — Rezension von: Gerhard Helbig, Joachim Buscha, Deutsche Grammatik. Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunterricht 137

IV. REVIEWS

J. Alan Pfeffer (Hrsg.), Studies in Descriptive German Grammar (Andrzej Z. BZDEGA) 149

Marianne Löschmann, Vom Lesen zum Sprechen (Kazimiera MYCZKO) 151

R. Ehnert, H.-E. Piepho (Hrsg.), Fremdsprachen lernen mit Medien (Jan KORZENIEWSKI) 154

L. Hoffmann, Kommunikationsmittel Fachsprache (Barbara SKOWRONEK) 159

S. Weber, Kommunikationsverfahren in Wissenschaft und Technik. Zur fachsprachlichen Aus- und Weiterbildung von Ausländern (Barbara SKOWRONEK) 162

Fachsprache. Internationale Zeitschrift für Fachsprachenforschung, -didaktik und Terminologie (Gerhard BUDIN)	163
Fremdsprachen und Hochschule (AKS-Rundbrief 13/14/1985) (Janusz ZYDRON)	166
Themen 1, 2 — Lehrwerk für Deutsch als Fremdsprache — Kursbuch (Maria SAWICKA)	167
Hermann Koch, Monika Koch-Posor, Ryszard Lipczuk (Hrsg.), Alltagsdeutsch. Lehr- und Übungsbuch (Stanislaw DZIDA)	169
Waldemar Martyniuk, „Mów do mnie jeszcze”. Podręcznik języka polskiego dla średniozaawansowanych — Handbook of Polish language for intermediate students (Wanda KUBICKA — PRZYWARSKA)	173
Frank Y. Gladney, Handbook of Polish (Wanda KUBICKA-PRZYWARSKA)	176
Susan Bassnett-McGuire, Translation Studies (Alicja PISARSKA)	177
Materialien Deutsch als Fremdsprache (Marek SZALEK)	180

V. REPORTS

Theorie und Praxis der deutsch-polnischen Konfrontation und Translation — Internationale Konferenz vom 3. bis 5. Juni 1985 in Rzeszów (Christoph SCHATTE)	183
Bericht über die internationale Konferenz „Sprache und Information in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft”, Hamburg 30.09.85 — 04.10.85 (Barbara SKOWRONEK)	184
Konferenz der Bilateralen Germanistenkommission DDR — VRP (Marianne LÖSCHMANN)	186

VI. PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED 189

James KRZYŹYŃSKI, Folk languages and its influence on the Attitudes and Motivation of Learners of English as a Foreign Language	107
Jolanta MYDŁAŃCZYK, An Experiment in Sociopsychologic Teaching of English	116

III. REVIEW ARTICLES

Barbara LEWANDOWSKA-TOMASZCZYK, Interlingual and Intra-lingual Relationships in a Theory of Translation — review of Gordon Torrey. In Search of a Theory of Translation	127
Józef DĄSKI, Deutsche Grammatik für Ausländer — Rezension von Gerhard Holbig, Joachim Buscher, Deutsche Grammatik für den Ausländer	137

IV. REVIEWS

J. Alan Peffer (Hrsg.), Studies in Descriptive German Grammar (Andrzej N. HODG)	149
Marianne Löschmann, Vom Lesen zum Sprechen (Karin Mierzejewski)	151
R. Ebert, H. E. Fiebig (Hrsg.), Fremdsprachen lernen mit Medien (Jan KOZMINIŃSKI)	164
J. Hoffmann, Kommunikatororientierte Fachsprache (Barbara SKOWRONEK)	168
S. Weber, Kommunikatororientierte in Wissenschaft und Technik. Zur fachsprachlichen Aus- und Weiterbildung von Ausländern (Barbara SKOWRONEK)	169

THE ADVANCED STUDENTS' MOTIVATION FOR EXPLICIT LEARNING OF GRAMMAR

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[Received January 15, 1985]

ABSTRACT. The role of the explicit teaching and learning of grammar in the process of foreign language teaching is a very controversial issue. Language teachers and language teaching methodologists differ in their opinions as to whether grammar should be taught at all and, if so, what is the best way of presenting it. In order to find out students' opinions on the usefulness of the explicit teaching and learning of grammar a questionnaire was given to fifty-one English majors studying in the Institute of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The results of the questionnaire reveal a very positive attitude on the part of the students towards the explicit learning of grammar. The deductive way of learning seems to be favoured by the majority of the respondents, who also unanimously point to translation as a very effective form of grammar exercise.

Introduction

There has been a sharp controversy over the role of grammar in the foreign language teaching/learning process. Two main trends can be distinguished in the recent history of language teaching. On one extreme we have language teaching specialists who see the deliberate teaching of grammar as an indispensable condition for the acquisition of a foreign language. Within this orientation, however, opinions are divided as to how grammar should be taught. Some of the proponents of the deliberate teaching of grammar put stress on implicit, whereas others are for explicit grammar teaching. The latter can be further subdivided into inductive and deductive teaching. On the other extreme we have language teaching specialists who are of the opinion that foreign language should be acquired in a more natural way, similar to the way in which a child acquires its first language. Within this particular approach it is thus believed that no deliberate, organized grammar teaching is necessary in the foreign language teaching/learning process. Let us now take a brief look at how this particular controversy has been reflected by various methods in the recent history of language teaching.

The grammar-translation method concentrated on the deliberate, explicit

teaching of grammar in a deductive way. Learners were presented with the rules of the foreign language under study and were asked to verbalise them and then to apply them in exercises. The ultimate objective of this method was the knowledge of formal grammar.

The direct method, on the other hand, insisted on excluding the deliberate teaching of grammar from the classroom. It was quickly discovered that this method of teaching was too demanding for learners with average language aptitude. It was modified by the introduction of deliberate grammar teaching in an inductive way.

The audio-lingual method advocated deliberate grammar teaching in an implicit way. The students were supposed to master selected patterns of the language on the basis of pattern practice, which was purely a mechanical activity. Any conscious study or knowledge of the rules of grammar was rejected as hindering the formation of correct linguistic habits. This procedure did not, however, bring about the expected results when applied on a larger scale in school teaching. Therefore, a modified version of the audio-lingual method recommends grammatical explanations which are to be supplied only after a given pattern has been mastered.

The cognitive code learning theory considers the knowledge of the rules of a language by the learners as an indispensable condition in language learning. According to cognitivists, competence should precede performance; therefore, they first concentrate on instilling in the learner the explicit knowledge of the rules. As the process of learning is viewed as gradual hypotheses formation and testing by the learners, the rules of grammar are usually presented in an inductive way.

In addition to the above-mentioned well-known teaching methods, a number of new methods have come into view in recent years and the controversy over whether to teach grammar in an explicit or implicit way is still current. The Silent Way, one of the best known and publicised new methods, concentrates on teaching the learners the linguistic code before they are asked to communicate. The learners acquire grammar in an implicit way in strictly controlled linguistic situations.

In another current method, Community Language Learning, there is no deliberate selection or gradation of the material — grammar is tackled by the teacher when the need arises and when the learners ask for information. Grammatical patterns and paradigms may be written on the blackboard and commented on by the teacher. Grammar learning in this totally learner-oriented method is inductive and, depending on the variety of the method implicit or explicit.

Yet another new method, the Total Physical Response Method, relies entirely on the implicit way of grammar teaching. In this method learners acquire the linguistic code by listening to commands given by the instructor

in the target language, and by fulfilling them, showing in this way that they understand what is required of them. According to Asher, the inventor of this method, all grammatical structures can be embedded in the teacher's commands and instructions.

From what has been said above it can be seen that explicit grammar teaching plays an important role in most of the recent methods of language teaching. Even those methods which initially rejected explicit grammar teaching later accepted it, to a lesser or greater extent, for the simple reason that classroom practice proved that the learners needed it. However, explicit grammar teaching has been recently attacked on theoretical grounds by S. Krashen and his Monitor theory. He distinguishes between subconscious, implicit language acquisition (a process similar to that of children's first language acquisition) and conscious, explicit language learning. He claims that only the former can lead to true mastery of a language, whereas the latter has only a controlling function, which means that it is available only as a monitor. In his opinion, the formal teaching of grammar should be limited to those rules which are both conceptually and formally simple, as they may help some of the learners, especially those who are, to use his term, optimal users of the monitor. More complex rules should be given only to those learners who are interested in the structure of the language for the purpose of language appreciation. He strongly opposes the view held by cognitivists that conscious learning needs to precede acquisition. Moreover, he claims that what is learned and what is acquired are essentially separate; the only direction in which some seepage can occur is from the acquired to the learned system.

This view, however, is not shared by other language teaching specialists. Although they do not reject the distinction between acquisition and learning, they put more stress on the latter than Krashen does. Stevick, for example, believes that there is a constant seepage between what has been learned and what has been acquired. A similar view is held by E. Bialystok, who, while making a distinction between Implicit and Explicit Knowledge, allows for some seepage in both directions, that is, not only from what has been acquired to what has been learned, but also from the explicit to the implicit knowledge store (Bialystok 1978:72).

The importance of the explicit teaching of grammar is stressed in the writings of M. Sharwood-Smith, who notices that it is often impossible to "... deny adult learners explicit information about the target language (TL) since their intellectual maturity as well as their previous teaching/learning experience makes them cry out for explanations ..." and that "teachers, and doubtless many students as well, view explanations as shortcuts ... a shorter and more effective way of mastering a structure" (Sharwood-Smith 1981:159-160).

In order to find out the students' opinion on the usefulness of explicit teach-

ing and learning of grammar, a questionnaire was given to English majors studying in the Institute of English at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. (The full text of the questionnaire is included in the appendix).

Subjects

The questionnaire was completed by a total of fifty-one students, all of whom can be regarded as advanced learners of English as they had been learning it for at least four years before entering the University. Freshmen and senior students were chosen, as it was expected that some differences in their attitudes towards the learning of grammar might be discovered. This expectation, however, has not been confirmed by the results; thus, the above-mentioned distinction will not be referred to in the present paper.

Results

Question 1. In the first item of the questionnaire the students were asked about their general attitude towards the explicit learning of grammar and its usefulness. Out of the 51 students who completed the questionnaire, 50 (98 per cent) believe that the explicit learning of grammar is very profitable. Four respondents (7.8 per cent) stated that it helps them to understand the system of the language better and leads to what might be called language appreciation. Twenty three students (45.1 per cent) claimed that explicit grammar learning directly influences the degree of grammaticality of their utterances in English and the remaining twenty three (45.1 per cent) agreed with both of the above statements.

Question 2. The aim of the second question was to discover what is, in the students' opinion, the most effective way of presenting grammar structures. Sequence 'e' (i.e. rule, examples, exercises) was favoured by sixty per cent of the students, seven students (13 per cent) favoured sequence 'b' (rule, examples, no exercises), five (10 per cent) preferred sequence 'd' (examples, discovering the rule, no exercises) and finally two students (4 per cent) preferred sequence 'g' (examples, rule, exercises).

Question 3. The aim here was to find out the degree to which the respondents pay attention to the grammaticality of their utterances in English in particular situations. Eight typical situations were listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were asked to indicate degree by choosing a frequency expression ranging from "never" to "always" for each given situation. For convenience we may call the answers „always", "very often" and "often" *positive*

and put them in one group, whereas the answers "sometimes", "rarely", "very rarely" and "never" might be called *negative* and put in another group. That is to say, answers of the first kind indicate that the students pay attention to the grammaticality of their utterances, whereas answers of the second type suggest that they do not.

Situation A: writing a composition at home.

Thirty one students (60.7 per cent) claimed that they always pay attention to grammaticality while writing a text for their composition class, eight (15.7 per cent) do so very often, eight often, two (4 per cent) sometimes, one (2 per cent) rarely, and one very rarely. In other words, there were forty seven (92.1 per cent) positive answers and four (7.8 per cent) negative answers.

Situation B.

During a discussion in a conversation class the students seem to pay less attention to the grammaticality of their utterances, in comparison with Situation A, as thirty three of the respondents (64.6 per cent) gave a positive answer, whereas eighteen (35.3 per cent) gave a negative answer.

Situation C.

During a private conversation with a native speaker conducted outside of class the students seem to pay the least attention to grammar. Twenty respondents (39.2 per cent) gave positive answers for this situation and twenty four (47 per cent) negative ones. Seven respondents stated that they had never talked to a native speaker before.

Situations D, E and F refer to examinations in practical English, which traditionally consist of three parts: grammar test, an essay, and an oral part. During the oral section the students are asked to talk and answer questions on a topic chosen at random from a list of topics which is made available to the students before the examination. Naturally, all of the students concentrate on grammaticality during a grammar test. Fewer students concentrate on grammaticality while writing an essay as part of examination (forty six positive answers — 90.2 per cent) and fewer still during the oral section (forty positive answers — 78.4 per cent).

Situation G.

Approximately one half of the students pay conscious attention to the rules of grammar during an exam in a subject other than practical English but conducted in English (twenty five positive answers — 48 per cent).

Situation H.

A discussion during a class in a subject other than practical English but conducted in English seems to be a situation in which the students pay very little attention to grammar as twenty two respondents (43.1 per cent) gave positive answers and twenty nine (56.9 per cent) negative ones.

Question 4. The purpose of question Number 4 was to find out the students' opinion about the role of theoretical knowledge in their efforts to master particular aspects of English. The students were asked to order three aspects of English (pronunciation, intonation, and grammar — understood here as morphology and syntax) from the one which requires the most theoretical background in order to master to the one which requires the least theoretical background. All the students believed that the mastery of grammar requires the most theoretical knowledge while opinions varied as to whether it is intonation or pronunciation which comes next.

Question 5. The aim of question No. 5 was to discover the students' attitudes towards their own errors in English grammar, and particularly the way they correct their own errors when they notice them. Eight familiar grammatical structures were listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were to indicate "feel" or "rule" according to the way they correct their own errors in that structure. The results show that, on the whole, the students correct their errors by "rule" rather than by "feel". Among errors which are most often corrected by "rule" are those in Conditional Clauses (an average of thirty nine respondents — 76.5 per cent — put "rule" here, an average of ten — 19.6 per cent — "feel", and an average of two — 4 per cent — both), past tense forms of irregular verbs (twenty nine — 56.9 per cent, nineteen — 37.3 per cent, two — 4 per cent respectively) and Indirect Speech (thirty three — 64.6 per cent, twelve — 23.5 per cent, six — 11.8 per cent respectively). Errors in the use of articles are most often corrected by "feel" rather than by "rule" (the corresponding figures here are eight — 15.7 per cent for "rule", thirty six — 70.6 per cent for "feel", and seven — 13.7 per cent for both). Next in this category of preference for feel-based error correction strategies are errors in the comparison of adjectives but this preference is much less apparent with twenty two (43.1 per cent) answers for "rule", twenty six (51 per cent) for "feel", and three (5.9 per cent) for both.

Question 6. The aim of this question was to give the students an opportunity to say which grammar structures give them most trouble and whether they try to recall a particular rule whenever they cannot avoid using these structures. Articles and the tenses of the verb seem to be the most difficult grammatical problems for Polish students as the former were mentioned by thirty five

respondents and the latter by twenty one. Most respondents admitted that they do try to recall rules whenever they have no other recourse, but some added that this does not always help.

Question 7. In question No. 7 the students were asked whether or not they study grammar on their own in addition to their regular grammar classes within the practical English course. Twenty of the students admitted that they do not do any extra work on grammar, although seventeen of them claimed that they would like to do so very much but they did not have enough time. Three students study grammar on their own only before exams in practical English, and one only during summer vacation. Of the twenty seven students who do work on their own, ten study English grammar by reading grammar textbooks with no exercises, six students do exercises, and five learn grammar by trying to discover rules accounting for the structures encountered while reading novels, newspaper articles, or listening to English language broadcasts. Eight students find giving private lessons in English an effective way of reviewing grammar. One student claims to learn grammar by translating short texts from English into Polish.

Question 8. The aim of Question 8 was to discover the students' attitudes towards translation as a technique of learning grammar. They were asked how they feel about translating sentences from English into Polish and from Polish into English, and all agreed that translation is a very effective technique. Thirty students (58.8 per cent) favoured translation exercises in both directions and twenty (39.2 per cent) were for translation exercises from Polish into English only.

Discussion

The results of the questionnaire reveal a very positive attitude on the part of the students towards the explicit learning of grammar. They believe that a formal knowledge of grammar is directly responsible for the correct form as well as fluency of their utterances in English. The ability to speak grammatically correct and fluent English is of great importance to them for a number of reasons. First of all, they feel that since they are majoring in English, they should be able not only to speak flawless English but also to account for the correctness of their utterances. Secondly, they believe that a good knowledge of the rules gives them a great deal of self-confidence in their use of the language. Thirdly, they believe that it helps them to differentiate between the meanings of their own utterances in the target language and those of their interlocutors which, they think, is essential in effective communication. Summing up, an explicit knowledge of the rules helps them preserve a good self-image as competent users of the target language. Moreover, taking into

consideration the fact that most of them will become teachers of English, they think that a good knowledge of the rules is indispensable in their future work. Some of them are interested in the conscious study of grammar for its own sake. They make conscious comparisons between English and Polish as well as between English and other languages they know in order to find out how speakers of different languages verbalise their thoughts.

From the above discussion it can be seen that the students favour the explicit teaching of grammar. Their responses to the second question indicate that they prefer the deductive way of the teaching of grammar, as 60 per cent of them chose Sequence 'e' (rule, examples, exercises) as the most effective. Such a preference can be explained by the fact that they had already been exposed to most of the rules of English before entering the University. In other words, the inductive procedure is not likely to arouse their interest. What they need is a review of the rules and further practice in their application, as well as — perhaps — a deeper study of the subtleties and the extra-linguistic aspects of grammar. The importance of conscious knowledge of the rules was further confirmed by the responses to Question No. 3, in which the students were asked to state whether they actually refer to the rules while using English in various situations. Here most of the students gave positive answers, i.e., they admitted that they do it always, very often or often. Only for three situations (talking to a native speaker, taking an exam in a subject other than English but conducted in English, and taking part in discussions during these same classes) negative answers slightly outnumbered positive ones. In these three situations the attention of the speaker is concentrated on message content rather than on form. Yet, more than 40 per cent of the respondents admitted that they consciously refer to the knowledge of the rules. Also while correcting their own errors, the students tend to refer to a given rule rather than to "feel", the only exception being in the use of articles. Articles are a major problem for the Polish learners of English partly because there are no articles in Polish and partly because the treatment of articles in pedagogical grammars of English available to the students is not satisfactory. Attempts at pedagogical presentation of articles and English determiners should be continued and be geared towards the specific needs of learners, depending on their linguistic background. In the case of Polish learners of English a comparative approach seems to be well justified since the category of definiteness and indefiniteness is present in the Polish language as well, but is expressed by other structural means (word order, sentence stress, etc.). A comparative approach, manifested in the classroom by the use of translation as a teaching technique, seems well justified in teaching grammar in general as revealed by the students' responses to Question 8 and by their additional comments in which they agree that translation is the most effective and at the same time most challenging technique of teaching and learning grammar.

Conclusions

The advanced students' attitudes towards the explicit learning and teaching of grammar are most positive ones. They believe it is an indispensable means of mastering a foreign language. The deductive way of learning seems to be favoured by the majority of the respondents, who also unanimously point to translation as a very effective type of grammar exercise.

APPENDIX

The questionnaire

1. Do you think that systematic learning of the grammar of a foreign language and a conscious study of grammar rules is necessary in the process of foreign language learning? If so, what are the advantages of a systematic study of grammar?
 - a — it helps to understand the system of the language under study
 - b — it directly influences the degree of grammaticality (correctness) of your utterances in the foreign language
 - c — other advantages (state them)

2. Which of the following ways of presenting grammatical structures suits you best:
 - a — a grammar rule
 - b — a grammar rule followed by examples
 - c — examples followed by a rule
 - d — examples on the basis of which you are to infer the rule
 - e — a rule followed by examples, then grammar exercises
 - f — exercises only
 - g — examples followed by a rule, then exercises

3. While speaking or writing in English, do you pay conscious attention to the grammaticality of your utterances? Answer using one of the following frequency expressions: always, very often, often, sometimes, rarely, very rarely, never.
 - a — writing a composition at home
 - b — taking part in a discussion during a conversation class
 - c — talking with a native speaker in private
 - d — during an exam in practical English — writing a grammar test
 - e — during an exam in practical English — writing an essay
 - f — during an oral part of an exam in practical English
 - g — during an exam in a subject other than English but taken in English
 - h — taking part in discussions during classes other than English but conducted in English

4. In your opinion, in mastering which of the following components of a foreign language is theoretical knowledge needed most:
 - a — pronunciation
 - b — intonation
 - c — grammar

5. When you notice you have made a mistake while speaking English and if your mistake is an error in the use of
 - a — Articles
 - b — 1st Conditional
 - c — 2nd Conditional
 - d — 3rd Conditional
 - e — Comparison or Adjectives
 - f — Passive Voice
 - g — Irregular Verbs
 - h — Tenses
 - i — Indirect Speech
 do you correct it by "feel" or by "rule"?
 Indicate "feel" or "rule" for each structure.
6. Which grammatical structures do you find particularly difficult?
 When you have to use them, do you try to follow the rules?
7. Do you study grammar on your own in addition to the material you have to prepare for your classes in practical English? If so, how?
8. Do you think that exercises in translating sentences from Polish into English and from English into Polish help in mastering the grammar of English?

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