ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ

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GRAMMAR ACQUISITION REVISITED[1]

Abstract: *"What is grammar and what does 'knowing grammar' mean to you?" have been the questions given to students who have been studying English as a major and an elective course at university. The idea behind the project has been to see whether the problem of students' negative attitude towards learning grammar had arisen during their primary and secondary school education and which differences in attitudes towards learning of grammar could be found between these two groups of students.*

Key words: grammar acquisition targeted listening, consciousness-raising, covert grammar.

In recent years, a certain feature has been evident with the students of the University of Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina) who have English as either minor or major course. Namely, each generation has more and more difficulties in passing the final exam at the end of the school year. What is more interesting, all the students have to pass the entrance exam which is, in general, the same every year, because knowledge required for a pass is approximately the same as on the grammatical tests for the FCE. All the students who enroll in our programme have to pass the grammatical test. These facts would lead one to assume that the students' performance on the final exam at the end of the school year would be good. Still, past three years made us witness the decrease in number of students who pass exams of Contemporary English I, II, III and IV. This was the reason for conducting a survey in order to determine reason(s) for such a bad performance.

It was very difficult to establish a real project due to lack of time and resources, so we decided to introduce a pilot project whose aim was to test whether something could be done in improving students' acquisition of grammatical structures as well as changing of their attitudes towards grammar itself. Namely, most of the students have been learning English for at least eight years and still the level they have achieved was mostly pre-intermediate (at least the students we have tested, who have taken English as non-obligatory course at university). The chosen groups were: 1st year students of Forestry Faculty, 1st year students of French Department of Faculty of Philosophy and 1st year students of English Department of Faculty of Philosophy. The choice was such for the simple reason that, apart from the fact they were researcher's classes, they have also shown interest in participating in the pilot project. Even though the idea was to conduct a similar kind of research with other groups and teachers, it was surprisingly difficult to find anyone who was actually willing to participate.

The groups were quite large (3 groups of 60 students). Nothing could be done about the actual number of participants, because we wanted to involve all the students in the pilot. It was quite important for the establishment of the face validity of

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the outcome results that students did not perceive themselves as examinees. Enormous efforts were made in order to create the surroundings in which they could feel self-confident. The idea behind this was to make them think that was the way that classes were usually conducted.

As a preliminary phase, a survey of both the students whose major was English and of those who had English as non-obligatory course was conducted. The question they had to respond to in not more than 30 words was "What is grammar and what does knowing grammar mean to you?" The idea behind this question was to see if the problem arose in the negative attitude towards grammar, which students acquired during primary and secondary school, and if there were any differences in attitudes towards grammar of those students whose major was English from those students who learned it as non-obligatory course. The answers that were given were almost the same which made us think that intrinsic motivation for learning grammar was in general low with both groups of students.

The results of survey given to students of the 1st year of Faculty of Forestry have shown that when students talked about grammar, they were usually inclined to thinking of a set of rules and structures whose presentation was easy and whose testing was even easier, because there were so many grammar textbooks and interactive exercises with keys. The only thing they thought their teacher had to do was to print out certain types of exercises (the more complicated, the better) and check the answers. The words "boring" and "hate" were the most common words connected with the word "grammar". What was even more interesting was the fact that students did not even bother to explain what "boring" or "hate" meant as if they had thought those words were strong enough to present their wish to be excused from learning "grammar".

The results of the survey given to students of the 1st year of French Department at the Faculty of Philosophy were somewhat puzzling. Even though most of the students agreed that grammar was something they actually needed, the complaint which was noticed in 20 out of 60 questionnaires was the fact that apart from learning French grammar they now "were forced" to learn English grammar. The negative attitude towards learning of two "different kinds of grammar at the same time" was somehow blinding the real purpose of learning English. We thought it was quite important for the project itself to emphasize that students made quite an obvious distinction between grammar of Serbian (their native tongue), grammar of French (their major) and grammar of English (the 2nd foreign language course they took).

The same question concerning the attitude towards learning grammar has been given to the students of 1st year of English Department at the Faculty of Philosophy. It is quite interesting that the answers matched those of the students whose major was not English. All of them connected grammar only to grammatical exercises done during their classes and 65 per cent of them stated they thought that grammar was not important for knowing the language, because the only thing that was truly important was communication. Even more, when asked later what the word grammar represented to them, the majority stated that grammar was a set of rules of a language that one had been learning in order to speak "properly".

It was obvious that students had very negative attitude towards grammar, a statement which we thought was very important, having in mind the fact that some of them were going to be future teachers of English. Indeed, the term "negative" is used here as an understatement, because almost 90 % of examinees said that as far as they were concerned, grammar was something "used by teachers to show pow-

er and is useless because what really matters is that people understand you".

The reason for this attitude originated, as we presupposed, in the way grammatical data were presented during classes. Namely, even though grammar-translation method has been out of use in classes (according to casual talks with the teachers from primary and secondary schools who have claimed that the method of teaching they have been using is either communicative or creative construction), somehow it appeared to be the only approach to grammar teaching which our students have come in touch with during their education in primary and secondary schools. From this we can see that the approaches to teaching grammar were those as a product and as a skill. Batstone (1995: 73) notes that there are three approaches to teaching grammar and explains them as following:

> Teaching grammar as product: helps learner to notice and to structure by focusing on specified forms and meanings
> Teaching grammar as process: gives learners practice in the skills of language use, allowing them to proceduralize their knowledge
> Teaching grammar as skill: carefully guides learners to utilize grammar for their own communication.

Having this in mind and wanting to test the influence of a teaching approach which has not been used very widely so far, we focused our attention of teaching grammar as process.

The starting point was the Titone's (1977: 177) postulation that "if immediate goal of grammar teaching - that is something that we can believe in with justification – is to lead a student to a level of functional acquisition of grammatical processes of coding and decoding, it is obvious that the functional acquisition of grammar equates the level of its getting closer to the praxis and not knowledge".[2]

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2 Translated from Serbian by Željka Babić.

Also, the theory of multiple intelligences by Howard Gardner had large influence in our choice of introduction of new features, because we wanted to predict and include the needs not of an imaginary average student, but as many students as possible taking into consideration the fact that *people have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles* (Gardner 1997: 6).

We introduced three new features in classes: targeted listening, consciousness-raising exercises and covert grammar.

Targeted listening was introduced as an attempt to increase acquisition. Namely, Richards (2002: 157) distinguishes five stages of the learning process: input, intake, acquisition, access and output. Somehow, too much attention is being drawn only to input and output; acquisition apparently should happen on its own. But, acquisition involves a number of processes: noticing, discovering rules, accommodation and restructuring, experimentation. All of this involves subconscious processes which can be influenced on. We supposed that listening will have a lot of influence on noticing and restructuring of fossilized and wrongly acquired structures.

Students were obliged to read and listen to English Cambridge Readers level 4, 5 and 6. They were told that they would have to answer certain questions related to the texts they read and listened to on their oral exam. The oral exam was later recorded, transcribed and grammatical features dealing with acquisition were revised and processed statistically according to model introduced by Tono (1999).

Consciousness-raising exercises have been either taken from Thornbury's *Uncovering Grammar* or adapted according to the needs of the syllabus. Their main goal was to raise awareness of usage of articles with nouns in general.

The introduction of exercises based on covert grammar had two main goals: first, to make classes more interesting for

students, and thus, increase the motivation; second, to increase influence on unconscious learning. Too many grammatical structures are being covered with exercises which are mainly drills; this is particularly applicable to those structures which the students' mother tongue does not possess. With Serbian language, this is true of the way we usually deal with presenting articles. The final products of this approach are students who can recite numerous rules and examples of the usage of articles, but whose performance is quite poor. We have to add that, of course, there are other reasons for this which we will not go into at this point.[3] We just wanted to examine this particular approach at this particular period of time. Nevertheless, there has never been any intention to generalize our results.

During the time of the pilot, students have been tested regularly (three times) and their progress was followed individually, and results dealt with in general.

The preliminary results have shown that there really was a progress made in acquisition of grammatical structures, which was influenced by the introduction of these new features. Namely, compared to the groups from previous school years and their results, we can see that the examinees we dealt with in our survey showed a positive trend in acquiring grammar, not just learning it. The first thing which was noticed was improvement in two areas which we did not predict, and these were the usage of articles and word order. We presupposed that the main problems would appear in the usage of those two features, because both of them either did not exist or were not the same in the mother tongue. Still, we should emphasize that the number of errors in using the articles decreased, which can be attributed to usage of covert grammar in the teaching process.

Compared with the results from the previous schoolyear, one realizes that the main improvement in the usage of articles has been in that the students ceased to avoid or overgeneralize the rules, but slowly started using them. That is, in the preliminary survey, students either used articles with most of the nouns disregarding the rule of usage with the countable nouns only; or they just did not use articles at all. The greatest improvement was shown in the usage of articles in set phrases (e.g. What a pity!) and after phrases beginning with "there is ...", for which the common teaching approach was either drill exercises or rote learning. The most surprising thing was that very few (3.4%) errors concerning articles had to do with using them with countable nouns. We suppose that such a result had been achieved due to the fact that articles were introduced through consciousness-raising tasks[4] and also that some influence must have been made through listening. Namely, Richards (2002:158) emphasizes that *input enhancement* can be realized through: simplification of input, frequency of exposure, explicit instruction, implicit instruction and consciousness-raising. Via input enhancement, one facilitates *intake*, and, at the same time, acquisition (ibid, idem). Having in mind the fact the Serbian does not have articles at all (even though determination exists), we think that the introduction of these exercises showed an excellent starting point for further research in ways of enhancing acquisition of English articles of L1 Serbian speakers.

As far as word order in concerned, the main improvement was made in restructuring of the L2 *interlanguage*.[5] The error analysis of the oral exam (conducted only once for each group because of the lack of time) proved that there were some important improvements made as far as acquisition of certain targeted structures was concerned. Still, it was quite obvious that the percentage of mistakes made was going to

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3 See Braidi (1999) and Krashen (1987).

4 See Thornbury (2001) for examples.
5 Selinker (1972), 209 — 231.

be much higher than on paper-and-pencil tests. That did not make us feel discouraged or even disappointed, because we actually did have time to work on exercises which would influence students' awareness of problems they had with the usage of certain grammatical features. The time for "real" acquisition is again something that we cannot totally influence and which has to be realized individually and according to personal abilities of language learners. It is consistent with Krashen's postulation that we have to give our students ample amount of time to acquire certain structures.[6]

The most important conclusion of this small pilot project was made after recapitulation of the after-class questionnaires which students had to do at the last class of their schoolyear. Answering the question which classes they liked / disliked, students from all three groups answered that they liked the most those classes in which they had to do "games and things the teacher brought herself" and disliked the most "when they did grammar exercises from the workbook". Of course, quite unaware that those "games and things" were also exercises dealing strictly with grammar acquisition, students somehow felt more comfortable during the classes and did not feel the pressure of knowing the right answer which was sometimes the one and only thing which prevented them in active participation during the classes. Speaking exercises related to the texts from Readers enabled them to put what they heard to some use, especially because they were told that they should listen for gist, and not look up each and every word in the dictionary.

At the end of this small pilot project, two things emerged on the surface. The first is the importance of introduction of new theoretical and practical data into the teaching process in our everyday classroom practice. Every little thing which will en-

hance acquisition, or at least, internal motivation for language learning, will help in execution of teaching tasks. The second is fear of change and introduction of extra-curricular activities noticed with some of the participants parallel with the total acceptance of novelties present with some teachers and their willingness to try whatever might help the students. The lack of enthusiasm of some colleagues for participation in the pilot was due to the fact that many of them have shown a real lack of confidence and quite a lot of reserves when being asked to introduce anything which would somehow differ from what it was asked of them in the curriculum. It was not the actual fear of novelty or work. I think that quite a lot of work has to be done in making people who write curricula see how important it is to revise them or at least how important it is to leave enough space in them for those who are willing to try new things and are not afraid of challenges which such an introduction will inevitably bring. Teachers of English have always been trying to be the first to introduce new ideas and technologies into their classrooms. The results of the project show that their efforts were not futile.

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6 See Krashen (1987): Monitor Hypothesis.

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RAZMATRANJE USVAJANJA GRAMATIKE

Rezime

"Šta je gramatika i šta znači 'znati gramatiku'?" pitanja su na koja su odgovarali studenti koji studiraju engleski jezik na osnovnim studijama i studenti koji ga uče kao izborni predmet. Željelo se ispitati da li je negativan odnos studenata prema učenju gramatike nastao za vrijeme osnovnoškolskog i srednjoškolskog obrazovanja i koje razlike postoje u odnosu prema učenju gramatike kod studenta koji pripadaju ovim dvjema grupama.

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