

The Experience of Albanian School in Improving the Teaching of Foreign Language Grammar



Linguistics

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to bring the experience of Albanian schools in renewing the teaching of foreign language grammar. Grammar occupies a significant place in the process of foreign language teaching and learning at all teaching levels in the Albanian schools. It has been long since it constitutes the focus of seminars organized by the department of education of the region and the institutions of both high and higher education. Grammar has been considered as the main linguistic component in foreign language classes. Grammar exercises practiced in there are multifarious.

Teaching grammar is based on the grammar material informed by grammar French language textbooks and teachers' ability to integrate grammar as a significant component of foreign language teaching with other components as the lexis, phonetics and so on, in order that it could better serve communication in a foreign language. Through examples and questionnaires this article brings out the experience of Albanian teachers concerning the teaching of French grammar.

The National Curriculum of Modern Languages for the Pre-university Public Education developed by the Albanian Ministry of Science and Education provides a clear picture of the objectives for the teaching and acquisition of grammar and the place it occupies in the high and nine-year school curriculum. Grammatical knowledge constitutes an important goal in the curriculum content. *"The experience of the Albanian school has shown that when the teacher uses various teaching methods and activities reasonably connected to each other, students' interest is kept alive. They become more active and motivated to learn the foreign language"* (Konci,1984)

In conformity with specific situation, it fully utilizes the communicative potential of a functional approach with situational learning of foreign languages, and as such, it provides students with opportunities to have a good command of the necessary phonological, lexical, and grammatical systems in their respective level.

The didactic materials emphasize this aspect by providing the objectives of communicative learning and realizing them through special linguistic interactive means. In this way, *"acquisition of structural knowledge gets intertwined with the free development of the functional aspect, reducing in this way the traditional structural gradation in the teaching process."* (Mash, 2000)

Grammar which includes knowledge on morphology, word formation, syntax and word order is studied in the course of communication. The criterion for the selection of grammatical issues is based on the direct practice with didactic materials on functional basis. The pedagogical goals of the teaching programs in the three levels of education in Albania have been clearly defined and they intend:

- To include knowledge on the foreign language system in the direct context of communicative practice
- To clarify the grammatical, lexical, and phonetic knowledge to be acquired by the student

Grammar acquisition begins in the third grade of the primary school and goes on until the last year of the high school. The national curriculum of modern languages clearly describes the grammar skills that should be developed in the foreign language classes. “*Principles of curriculum design are based on the development of multi-linguistic and multicultural capacities of an individual to enable him to confront problems of communication in a multi-linguistic and multicultural Europe*”. (Krashen,1981).

Based on an analysis of French text-books prepared by Albanian and foreign authors, it can be noticed that in many of them, explanation and different activities are focused on grammar issues. This testifies to the attention paid to grammar as one of the most important components in the process of foreign language teaching/learning. This ascertainment also holds true for the text-books written lately in the light of the *National Curriculum of Modern Languages*. The table of the subjects with a focus on the morphologic-syntactic structure is displayed by levels below. (Mash, 2000)

The third class	-Le présent (trois formes : affirmative, négative, interrogative) -Les articles un, une, des, le, la, l', les -Le pluriel des noms -Le féminin des noms etc
The fourth class	-Les adjectifs qualificatifs (singulier, pluriel) -Il faut + infinitif -Le comparatif des adjectifs (masculin, féminin) -Les adverbes de quantité (beaucoup, peu) etc
The fifth class	-Les pronoms personnels -L'interrogation -Le passé composé avec “être” et “avoir” -Les formules de politesse: s'il te plaît, s'il vous plaît, j'aimerais, je voudrais etc...
The sixth class	-Les noms et adjectifs de couleur -Les adverbes: quand, combien, comment -Les pronoms personnels COD: le, la, les (cd) -Les pronoms personnels COI: me, te, nous, vous, lui, leur etc...
The seventh class	-Les structures interrogatives: qui est-ce qui/ qu'est-ce qui? quand? comment? pourquoi? -Les conjonctions de coordination: mais, où, est, donc, or, ni, car -Les adverbes en, y -Les pronoms relatifs: qui, que, où etc...
The eighth class	-Les adjectifs indéfinis: même, tout -L'ordre des mots dans la phrase -La structure si + présent + présent/futur simple -Les adverbes en -ment etc...
The ninth	-Les indicateurs temporels: depuis, il y a, ça fait que

class	-Les verbes pronominaux (présent, passé composé) -Le participe présent et le gérondif -La conjonction de subordination “que” etc...
The tenth class	-Le discours direct et indirect -Les formes impersonnelles du verbe: il est, il arrive, il pleut -Le passif -Les subordonnées circonstancielles: cause, but, condition...
The eleventh class	-Les différentes expressions du temps -Les pronoms relatifs composés -Situer dans l'espace -Situer dans le temps etc...
The twelfth class	-La concordance des temps -Les subordonnées: relatives, complétives, circonstancielle de temps, de manière, de conséquence, de concession et de condition -La comparaison etc...

Acquisition of these structures demands the application of contemporary methods of teaching grammar. “These methods give grammar its due importance in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages”. Cuq, . (2004). If a parallel line is drawn with Albanian language text-books, it can be noticed that Albanian authors have made evident efforts into writing text-books to teach the Albanian language to Albanian students. This analysis contributes to the understanding that they have also shown special importance to the teaching of grammar. Albanian and French languages are both characterized by rich grammar systems. This is evidenced by the text-books used to teach these languages in Albania.

Problems that show up while teaching them are numerous. A consideration of the text-book used to teach Albanian language to foreign students written by professors E.Hysa and Gj.Shkurtaj shows that “texts have been purposefully selected in such a way as to incorporate both grammar issues that are to be explained in the respective units devoted to grammar and words and expressions which gradually increase in number along with the respective grammatical knowledge involved in each lesson” (Shkurtaj, Hysa 1996). This parallel is drawn to make people aware of the similarities and differences between the grammar systems of Albanian and French, a thing which will be noticed further in the study.

Opinions concerning the renovation of grammar teaching which are various but often contradictory are related to

- A shift from traditional grammar teaching to teaching grammar to the benefit of communication.
- A new vision of teaching with a focus on the Common European Frame of References for Languages.
- Communicative exercises to the benefit of grammar acquisition and grammatical error correction and shunning.

- The place grammar occupies in foreign language classes.
- Use of new text-books which involve authentic documents to instill communication in foreign language in life-like situations.

To have a clear idea about the way the grammar of the French language is taught in the Albanian schools, a questionnaire has been prepared. It was completed by teachers of the primary and secondary schools. The analysis will focus on two aspects:

- The place grammar occupies in foreign language classes versus other linguistic disciplines.
- The way teachers introduce grammar to students.

The questionnaire was completed by 82 teachers of the French language from the cities of Shkodër, Lezhë, Elbasan, Pogradec and Korçë. The teachers questioned were mainly women and their age ranges from 30 to 45. All teachers graduated from Tirana University for French and they have had a relatively long teaching experience.

Actually, it is very difficult to create an exact idea concerning the practices used in foreign languages classes about the teaching of grammar. “This component has currently assumed special importance by being considered as an indispensable element for whoever wants to learn a foreign language”. (Newby 2001) It can be noticed that teachers use various methods to effectively teach grammar. Some of them are very interested in contemporary methods, others keep using traditional methods to teach grammar by considering them as fruitful. The following is an analysis of the above mentioned aspects.

1. Position of grammar in foreign language classes

In view of all teachers interviewed, grammar occupies the main place in foreign language classes, it comes prior to lexis, civilization and phonetics. On the one hand, this can be explained by the fact that to communicate in a foreign language, students need to necessarily study the grammar of that language. On the other hand, care must be taken not focus on grammar only in foreign language teaching, neglecting in this way other components.

In general, teachers of the French language apply the principles of the communicative method which advocates foreign language acquisition through communicative activities, grammar teaching included. In classroom conditions, the communicative situations in foreign language teaching is carried out through text-books whose authors managed to intertwine grammatical activities with communicative situations because students estimate grammar acquisition of special importance. It can be noticed in the questionnaire that what teachers recommend is in line with students’ requirement.

The question that can be raised is: “Why is teaching grammar estimated of primary importance by both students and teachers”? On the one hand, grammar acquisition probably gives some sort of confidence. When the student learns a grammatical rule, he might think that he has acquired part

of the linguistic system, even though he may commit mistakes as he applies the rule. “Grammar rules are acquired more easily when the student rationalizes and contributes to their elaboration. Only in this way does the teacher become convinced whether students have acquired grammar knowledge. In this way, he becomes a mediator of acquisition“.(Tagliante,1994) Nevertheless, even when grammar knowledge is conveyed through the traditional method, “grammar acquisition is considered as an element of stability by the students distinguishing it from other linguistic activities”. (White, 1989)

On the other hand, teachers include grammar in their syllabuses too, and they devote grammar issues special time. However, every teacher has his own way of teaching.

Based on teachers’ answers, it can be pointed out that time devoted to grammar varies from 20-70% of the lesson. If these data were interpreted, it can be stated that teachers who devote 20% of the time, or about 10 minutes of every lesson to grammar propose balanced teaching. To better judge about the efficiency of grammar teaching, pedagogical activities which the teacher employs in this period should be taken into account. Time described by each teacher does not pinpoint to one and the same thing. Some teachers dedicate half of the teaching time i.e. 50% of the lesson to grammar, some others devote 70% of the teaching time to grammar. The graph below displays the time teachers devote to grammar acquisition.

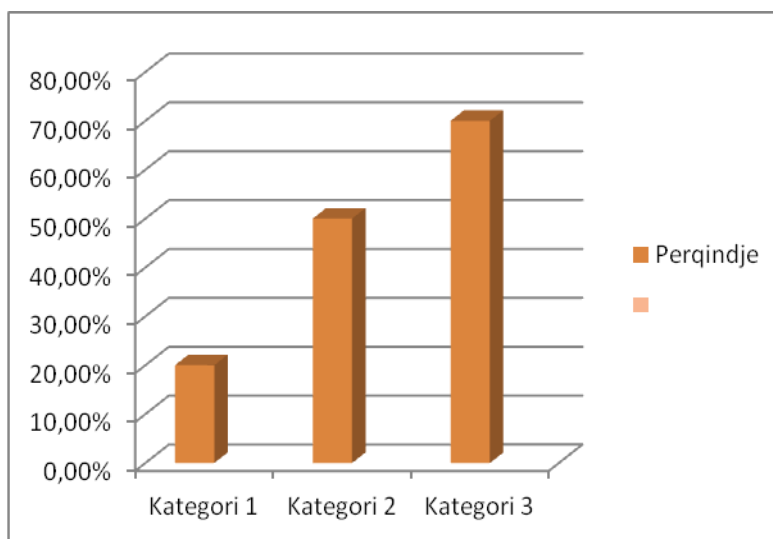


Figure 1: Results of the questionnaire about the place grammar occupies in foreign language classes

Besides, based on various views about the place grammar occupies in foreign language classes, it can be noted that teachers devote certain time to grammar, without overestimating it, despite students’ desire to acquire as many grammar rules as possible. Nevertheless, “grammar contributes to efficient communication in foreign language classes only when it is integrated with other linguistic components”. (Moirand, Porquier and Vives, 1989).

2. Introducing grammar in foreign language classes

This issue is related to the way the teacher introduces grammar in foreign language classes. In the questionnaire, a combination of the traditional method with elements of the communicative approach can be noted. This means that teachers try their best to provide students with teaching that favors the development of skills to communicate in a foreign language. “Combination of the traditional teaching of grammar with the contemporary instruction shows that teachers consider the former even more efficient, and that they find abandoning it difficult”. (Guirad, 1974) Teachers admit that they use the terms of traditional grammar. What is more, 30% of them use a simple meta-language to avoid students’ vagueness. They are of the opinion that “discussion of grammatical issues should be made in compliance with students’ needs and level, avoiding at the same time simplification or complication of the issue under discussion”. (Roulet, 1971)

Based on the results of the questionnaire, it can be stated that, about 20% of the teachers that completed the questionnaire practice the inductive method to teach grammar. Examples extracted from contexts allow students to elaborate grammar rules for themselves. The rest of the teachers apply the inductive method. This depends on the degree of the difficulty of the grammar issue that is being discussed and the students’ level. This combination fits teachers’ main objective to adjust to students’ level. Worth of mentioning is a small number of teachers who applied implicit grammar, though they always intertwine it with the inductive or deductive methods, so that every grammar rule could be understood by students

The data of the questionnaire show that the deductive method slightly predominates, however, from both the synthetic and the analytic views, the two methods are applied. 85% of the teachers admit that the treatment of a grammatical issue is realized through a text, whose type is not always determined. It can be stated that the semantic meaning outweighs the form of the subject matter that is being analyzed, which means that every teaching text is discussed in a certain context, then grammar issues that will later on be discussed and analyzed are set aside. This testifies to the fact that actually, “foreign language teachers perceive the development of communicative skills in a foreign language closely linked with the semantic aspect”. (Vigner, 2004)

In this way, they help students to submit the acquired grammatical knowledge to communication which constitutes the main goal of the process of foreign language teaching. They accomplish it thanks to the authentic materials they use to teach grammar. Thus, “grammar no longer constitutes a linguistic component mastered only by the teacher who transmits it to students”. (Roulet, 1971)

Conclusions

Grammar is considered by Albanian teachers like one of the most important components in the process of foreign language teaching/learning.

The criterion for the selection of grammatical issues is based on the direct practice with didactic materials on functional basis

Teachers no longer dictate grammar rules, they invite students to rationalize about the grammar issue being treated. They admit that the two main elements in foreign language classes are grammar rules and grammar exercises. The latter help students to apply the grammar rule and check whether students have understood it.

Treatment of the grammar rule in foreign language classes is viewed from different viewpoints by the teachers. Most teachers do not provide formulated rules, they elaborate them in collaboration with their students. They realize this by offering part of the rule which is then completed by students. Only 10% of the teachers provide formulated rules to be acquired.

Interpretation of these data depend on the level of the students and the degree of the difficulty of the grammar issue to be studied. With a group of beginners, explanation of grammar rules is implemented in several stages because the students do not have the necessary linguistic capacity to understand the whole content of a grammar rule. Unlike beginners, the advanced students manage to elaborate grammar rules for themselves through examples taken from authentic materials or formulated by them, and in this way, they create an atmosphere of class interaction

As for the ranking of grammar issues, teachers are free to choose how to organize the lesson. They respect the guidelines provided by the textbook of the French language, however, they frequently go by their own pedagogical instinct to adapt teaching of grammar rules to students' level.

Questionnaire analysis leads to the understanding that grammatical practices used in the French language classes in the Albanian schools rely on modern methods, notwithstanding the fact that there are teachers who find it difficult to break from traditional methods of teaching grammar.

Most French language teachers try to give students grammar knowledge that assist them to communicate in specific situations.

Language teaching/learning is based on use of new text-books which involve authentic documents to instill communication in foreign language in life-like situations.

Teachers should receive appropriate training to meet the requirements of students for a fruitful and contemporary teaching.

The renovation of grammar teaching is related to a new vision of teaching with a focus on the Common European Frame of References for Languages.

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