THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES

ROLUL GRAMATICII ÎN CADRUL EUROPEAN COMUN DE REFERINȚĂ PENTRU LIMBI

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Abstract

In the history of language teaching, the role of grammar has been addressed by several language theories, pedagogues and, currently, in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). The way grammar is considered has a decisive influence on pedagogical practices, the learning process and many other areas involved in language teaching. This paper is a review of how grammar has evolved over the last fifty years from a CCEFL perspective. Although there is a linguistic parallel framework between CLT (communicative language teaching) and CEFRL, some issues still need to be reviewed on the notion of competence or grammatical accuracy and its role in language teaching.

Key-words: Grammar teaching, grammatical competence/accuracy, CLT (communicative language teaching), CEFL (Common European Framework for Languages).

Rezumat

În istoria predării limbilor străine, rolul gramaticii a fost abordat de mai multe teorii lingvistice, pedagogi și, în prezent, în cadrul comun european de referință pentru limbi (CCEFL). Modul în care este considerată gramatica are o influență decisivă asupra practicilor pedagogice, a procesului de învățare și multe alte domenii implicate în predarea limbilor străine. Această lucrare constituie o revizuire a modului în care gramatica a evoluat în ultimii cincizeci de ani din perspectiva CCEFL. Chiar dacă există o paralelă lingvistică cadru între PCL (predarea comunicativă a limbilor) și CCEFL, unele probleme necesită încă o revizuire cu privire la noțiunea de competență sau corectitudine gramaticală și rolul acesteia pentru predarea limbilor străine.

Cuvinte-cheie: predare gramaticii, competență/corectitudinea gramaticală, PCL (predare comunicativă a limbilor străine), CCEFL (cadrul comun european de referință pentru limbi).

Grammar has held and continues to hold a central place in language teaching. The zero grammar approach was flirted with but never really took hold, as it is evident in both the current textbook materials and in current theories of L2 acquisition. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that teaching grammar works. [3, p. 102]

Parallel to the development of linguistic theories with a functional view of language and pedagogical approaches to teaching the second/foreign language reflecting that view – language for communication-, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages,

CEF for short, also derived from the same Hallidayan perspective of language, although it did not specifically address or propose a teaching method or a language theory [9].

The CEF had its origin in the Council of Europe, which in the fifties started focusing on teaching languages (particularly French and English) to adults. In the seventies, the Council of Europe, still with language teaching as one of its major priorities, provided the framework for the development of the Threshold level (1975, 1990), which put forward "categories of communication", and gave way to pre-communicative approaches based on notions and functions. The emphasis was on using language for practical communication, outside the classroom.

The CEF did not constitute a teaching method, so either it followed pre-communicative approaches where grammar was present in the form of notions and functions or, alternatively, adhered to the Natural approach, in which grammar had no role, as it was considered a detriment to communication. In the classroom, however, these theories underlying applied linguistics had not yet influenced traditional teaching practices, which still focused on a drilling or presentation-practice- production layout. [7, p.187]

In the eighties the Council of Europe continued supporting the Threshold level and promoted the incorporation of some initiatives and further developments, such as a lower (Waystage) and a higher (Vantage) level for English, which were followed by parallel descriptions for other languages. Again these levels were specified in terms of communication and abilities addressed to specific groups of learners. Grammar teaching constituted an issue left to be decided by syllabus creators, textbooks writers, and teachers. In the classroom it was the era of CLT. [7, p.187]

In 1991, due to the change in the political situation of Europe and the broadening of its frontiers, there was a need to calibrate the standards and reference levels of different countries so that a common framework would be agreed upon. The Waystage, Threshold and Vantage levels developed in the 80s provided a basis for the creation of the six-level scale of the CEFR (A1-C2). [7]

Ten years later (2001) this scale, from beginner or A1 to very proficient learner or C1, has provided a systematic description of what a learner/user of a language 'can do' at a given level in any language. These descriptors are sufficiently general so that they can be applied to different languages: they describe, but they do not suggest or recommend.
For example, in level B1, the learner can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. [9]

In line with the functional framework which served as a basis for CLT, the CEF considers language in terms of communicative competence or, in other words, as the ability for learners to use the language. Communicative competence is in turn divided into several areas (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge), although the one we will lay emphasis on is linguistic competence, which includes lexical, phonological and syntactic knowledge, or, in traditional terms, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Grammatical competence is defined in the CEF as follows: knowledge of, and ability to use, the grammatical resources of a language. [7, p. 188]

Grammatical competence is the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognizing well-formed phrases and sentences in accordance with these principles (as opposed to memorizing and reproducing them as fixed formulae)." [2] Grammatical competence is viewed as integral to all language skills, which learners have to master progressively to arrive at a high degree of accuracy, specifically within higher levels (C1) "consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot" [2].

Even though grammar is explicitly mentioned as a competence or integral part of the language, the grammar that should be attached to any of the descriptors within the CEF

depends on the particular language, and within that language, a range of different grammar items could be chosen to carry out any given 'can do' statement.

If previously when mentioning grammar the term to be used was grammatical competence in the 2018 version of CEFL they refer to grammar as **grammatical accuracy**, which concerns both the user/learner's ability to recall 'prefabricated' expressions correctly and the capacity to focus on grammatical forms whilst articulating thought. This is difficult because when formulating thoughts or performing more demanding tasks, the user/learner has to devote the majority of their mental processing capacity to fulfilling the task. This is why accuracy tends to drop during complex tasks. In addition, research in English, French and German suggests that inaccuracy increases at around B1 as the learner is beginning to use language more independently and creatively. The fact that accuracy does not increase in a linear manner is reflected in the descriptors. Key concepts operationalized in the scale include the following:

► control of a specific repertoire (A1 to B1);

► prominence of mistakes (B1 to B2);

► degree of control (B2 to C2).

Below are presented the descriptors of grammatical accuracy

C2 Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).

C1 Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot.

B2 Good grammatical control. Occasional 'slips' or non-systematic errors and minor flaws in sentence structure may still occur, but they are rare and can often be corrected in retrospect.

Shows a relatively high degree of **grammatical control**. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding. Has a good command of simple language structures and some complex grammatical forms, although he/she tends to use complex structures rigidly with some inaccuracy.

B1 Communicates with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts; generally good control though with noticeable mother tongue influence. Errors occur, but it is clear what he/she is trying to express. Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used 'routines' and patterns associated with more predictable situations.

A2 Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes – for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.

A1 Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire.

Pre-A1 Can employ very simple principles of word order in short statements.

As it has been implied above, there are a number of unsolved issues involved in the notion of grammatical competence reflected in the CEF, regarding what grammar is and its role in language learning. However, the foremost problem deals with the notion of competence. Competence is, following a linguistic perspective and adopting Chomsky's generativist views

[14, p.78], "the knowledge and rules that are necessary to produce speech" whereas performance is "the way speech functions when contaminated with external factors". Alternatively, considering a psychological based cognitive framework, competences can be defined as "higher order cognitive skills and behaviors that represent the ability to cope with complex, unpredictable situations". [11, p.333]

The adoption of a functional perspective implies measuring competence through performance, that is to say, assessing inner knowledge with actual behavior. Accepting a cognitive view means using labels such as competence, skill, ability and can do in an interchangeable way, labels which are similar but not identical, as they involve different psychological processes. Thus, both definitions of competence involve their inability to be evaluated. [13, p. 82] Therefore, syllabus designers, textbook authors and teachers are expected to measure the acquisition of these competences through a behavior: what has been termed descriptors or learning objectives, which explain what the learner can do. This is a performance based measure.

A second problem in line with the previous shortcoming involves these descriptors, as they are categories too broad for actual implementation [9].
Which grammar ought to be considered? That is to say, which grammar item should be attached to those specific levels? The answer to these two questions lie in the linguistic theory considered and the notion of grammar ascribed to it. Keddle for instance, accuses the document of ignoring grammar. [6, p.45] Although the CEF does provide a definition of grammar, it is not explicit in providing an explicit linguistic theory. As quoted in the CEF, this lack of accuracy is intentional, and would require researchers and specialists in further categorization work about the grammar of the different languages:

The grammar of any language in this sense is highly complex and so far defies definitive or exhaustive treatment. There are a number of competing theories and models for the organisation of words into sentences. Here we limit ourselves to identifying some parameters and categories which have been widely used in grammatical description. [2, p.113]
A third problem deals with methodology. How should grammar be incorporated in the teaching and learning process? What notion of teaching and learning should be chosen for the classroom? Would it focus on accuracy or would it be enough that the learner can do what we ask, even in an imperfect way? As defined above, grammatical competence/accuracy is one of the skills the learners have to master progressively. How can progressive be interpreted in cognitive and linguistic terms? How would it be measured? The CEF has an answer for these issues, which entails again, as in the notion of grammar, not adopting particular methodologies: 'Nor should it embody any one particular approach to language teaching to the exclusion of all others'. Methodology is explicitly and intentionally left to teachers and textbook designers to decide, a fact which has received some criticisms but also support, because methodology varies with pedagogic culture. [2, p. 18]

Fourth, many teachers throughout Europe do not know what CEF is or how to use it. They are equally unaware of its classroom implications with regards to methodology, materials, student autonomy and assessment of communicative competence over and above such things as discrete item grammar testing, for example.

Fifth, what would the connection be between CEF recommendations and how grammar is considered in post communicative approaches? As the definition of grammatical competence asserts, 'producing and recognizing well-formed phrases' is considered much more appropriate than 'memorizing and reproducing as fixed formulae'. However, memorization as a learning tool is not a negative strategy, as it has been shown that the learners' age, learning style and the teaching methodology influence the type of learning strategies used for learning a language. Younger learners tend to use memory strategies whereas older ones analyze the language. Besides, there is a very positive correlation between verbal memory and language aptitude. [8, p.367]

That is to say, the more memory for words learners have, the more probabilities they will have of becoming successful language learners. [4]

Regarding the notion of grammar and its problem of imprecision, Gouveia points at the implicit functionalist view of the CEF, inherent in the new generation of reference level descriptions (RLD) being developed to identify the forms of a given language. [5, p.18] There have appeared a number of British Council proposals for a Core Inventory using corpus data and other tools to produce more detailed descriptors. Other researchers are focusing on the development of RLDs in the areas of grammar and language functions, using empirical data from corpora and curricula to describe learning goals.

Considering the difficulty for their evaluation, the notion of learning outcomes, or in the CEF, can do statements, has evolved to overcome the lack of explicitness, although some imprecision still exists. [13, p. 79] Portfolio documents are being designed and incorporated in different countries by educational experts and included in many textbooks and curricula, both for Primary and Secondary education. Many of them can be freely accessed.
Finally, considering methodological issues, the CEF is not a new approach for teaching languages, so explicit guidelines should not be asked for. [7, p. 188]

This descriptive view of grammar in context entails that language is for communication, in other words, for performing. Thus, as long as learners can use the language, becoming skilled at grammar may involve inductive or deductive processes, presentation-practice-production cycles, understanding, reflecting and using, or exemplification and as long as it is not an end in itself, but a means for communication. [10, p. 9] As Gouveia mentions, the issue, for the CEF, is not the process, but the outcome: being able to use real language. [5, p. 17]

Methodological decisions on how to do this have been left to those who instruct and have been doing so for years: teachers.

The important question is not whether teaching and learning grammar is necessary and/or sufficient for language learning, but whether it helps or not. And as states: that yes, it does help, provided it is taught consistently as a means to improving mastery of the language, not as an end in itself. [12, pp. 77-78]

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