

Section 4: FOCUSING ON ACQUISITION OF GRAMMAR, LEXIS AND READING SKILLS

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SHOULD WE TEACH CHILDREN GRAMMAR?

In 1973, that is, almost 30 years ago, Heidy Dulay and Marina Burt wrote a well-known and very influential article, *Should we teach children syntax?* The concept of *syntax* as they interpreted it there and the concept of grammar in this particular context are almost identical, so I borrowed and adapted this well-known title in order to juxtapose our respective answers.

Dulay and Burt's answer to the question posed in the title was a very firm **no**, whereas ours is going to be **yes, but...**

Dulay and Burt came to their conclusion on the basis of a study conducted in the USA in three school districts, two in Northern California and one in New York City. They studied **natural** speech elicited from 145 Spanish speaking five-to-eight-year-olds who were all learning English. The conclusion they came to was that exposing a child to a **natural communication situation** is sufficient to activate his language learning processes, and that learning the syntax should be left to children. Our answer would probably be the same if we could supply children in our schools with natural communication situations. We all know children who have picked up their English and other foreign languages by living in the surroundings in which the respective languages were spoken natively.

What we have in mind here is institutionalized English taught in Croatian primary schools from the first grade on with any number of weekly periods ranging from two to five. The more intensive input of the foreign language we can afford, the less time should be devoted to the teaching of syntax. However, with an average limited input of English in our schools, children should be prompted in activating their processes of acquiring and learning grammar.

There are many differences between children of different ages due to the stage they have reached in their development – biological, intellectual, cognitive, affective and social. In teaching grammar, these differences should be taken very seriously into consideration.

Following Piaget's stages of children's cognitive development, a distinction should be made between children at the stage of *concrete operations*, that is from the age of 7

to roughly 11 years, and those entering the stage of *formal operations* that according to Piaget starts at roughly 11 years of age.

When grammar is taught to children from 7 to 11 years, a number of conditions should be fulfilled:

1. It should be taught via functional categories.
2. Categories should be selected.
3. The use of grammatical terminology should be extremely limited.
4. Grammatical mistakes should be tolerated.
5. All the help that the mother tongue can offer should be used.
6. Sociocultural categories should be contrasted.

Let's consider each of these conditions in some detail:

1. *Grammar should be taught to children via functional categories (not grammatical ones).*

Grammar is an abstract presentation of the language system. Children at the stage of concrete operations, that is from 7 to 11 years of age, cannot understand abstract concepts. On the other hand, they can memorise anything from paradigms, strings of nonsense words, nursery rhymes (often nonsensical) to grammar rules, without being aware of the meaning. The abuse of this capacity of children may be exemplified by the demands for the memorisation of masses of versatile written materials by traditional school methods. In teaching English grammar, anything similar to the above should be abandoned. In our long-term research on the process of children's acquisition and learning of English, it was observed that children are perfectly capable of understanding the basic relationships expressed by the language via functional categories (Vilke, 1995).

So, instead of teaching them *singular* and *plural* they should be shown the difference between *one* and *more than one* which they will need in communicating in the foreign language. *Possession* as a functional category is expressed through a number of grammatical categories – *possessive pronouns*, *possessive adjectives*, the *saxon genitive*, the *of phrase*, and *I have got*.

As egocentrism is one of the characteristics of children at this stage of development, they will be very happy to be able to say that something belongs to them and not to somebody else, or to proudly say *I've got a new computer game*. At this point their language acquisition device will be ready for generalisations in functional categories.

2. *Categories we want to teach should be selected.*

In our research projects we have often observed that concepts expressed by some grammatical categories are simply not used in children's language performance. Pronouns are a typical example. Even if they understand the meaning, they prefer the more concrete use of nouns. In one of our studies the children were shown two pictures. In one, there was a girl with a red ball, in the other a boy. The question was:

Who has got a red ball – he or she? In a large majority of cases, the answer was (*the*) *girl* (Vilke, 1988).

The teacher could hardly leave out pronouns in classroom discourse, but the thing to recommend would be to postpone insistence on their correct use until a later date. It would imply treating pronouns and other *difficult* parts of the grammatical system as vocabulary items. In this particular case *difficult* means too abstract for the age and not essential for communication (*articles, third person –s, auxiliary verbs, and the like*).

3. *The use of grammatical terminology should be extremely limited.*

Children have been very much sinned against when the learning of abstract concepts comes onto the educational scene. They can memorise anything in a parrot-like manner if they have to, but they can understand only those concepts that are in the domain of their level of cognitive maturity developing over time. Children between the ages of 7 and 11 years, being in the stage of Piaget's *concrete operations*, understand how the language functions on one hand, but, on the other, they can't understand the abstract presentation of the same language functions, which is what grammar is basically about. They will have certainly become familiar with concepts like sentence, verb, noun, tense in their mother tongue classes (and, alas, with many more!) but the teacher should not hesitate to bring home to them the same concepts once again. Speaking about the term *tense*, it would be advisable to stress the difference between *time, tense* and *weather* which are covered by the same word *vrijeme* in Croatian. Grammatical terminology should be at this age used with a lot of caution if our aim is to turn our young students in the direction of communicative competence. Their early efforts in advancing to this particular goal will be much better catered for if the teacher resorts to the functional categories which help to do things with the language. For example, the expressions *Open the door! Stand up!* indicating something that has to be performed, carry expressions much more meaning at this age than the term *imperative*.

4. *Grammatical mistakes should be tolerated.*

Basically, there are two kinds of oral exercises that are used in a language classroom, *skill getting* and *skill using* activities (Rivers, 1981). In *skill getting* activities, the stress is on the acquisition of the correct form. Such activities include different mechanical exercises, like language practice through songs, poems, nursery rhymes, structured role plays, etc., which children enjoy performing in a playful manner. They will not mind repeating each utterance many times, as long as each member of a group has a go and can utter it with little or no changes. Here, the teacher should insist on accuracy, especially on the accuracy of pronunciation, to make the most of the ability of the learners of this age group to imitate the phonetic system of the foreign language. When dealing with this kind of exercise, grammatical mistakes should be taken care of, too, especially when set phrases are practised. *What's the time?, What's the weather like today,? I am*

hungry, I am tired, etc., can hardly be said in any other way, and the sooner our learners internalise it, the better.

In *skill using* activities, the important thing is the message the learner tries to convey. With their limited repertoire of English structures and vocabulary items, the learner will make an effort to express their real thoughts, ideas, and needs. If the message gets through to the receiver, it will be a success on which to base further advances into the world of the real use of the language. The teacher's corrections of grammatical mistakes will be completely counter-productive at this point, as they will distract (and even frustrate) the learner who makes efforts to follow the thread of their thoughts. Nevertheless, the teacher is not supposed to forget about the mistakes, as they will have to be registered and taken care of on a later occasion when the *skill getting* activities are the goal of teaching.

5. *All the help that the mother tongue can offer should be used.*

The presence of the learner's mother tongue is a reality nobody can deny. All the methods of teaching foreign languages have been deeply aware of its existence and consequently, have treated it in different ways. Some, like the *grammar-translation method*, started from it, *the direct method* pretended it did not exist, and the structuralists went even further. L. Bloomfield, for example, suggested that in learning foreign languages you should forget about all other languages, especially your own (Bloomfield, 1942).

At the present moment we all feel that a learner's mother tongue is a precious asset that we, in the foreign language teaching field, should cherish and use for the best of our learners.

Vygotsky (1986: 196) is very explicit about that: *Success in learning a foreign language is contingent on a certain degree of maturity in the native language. The child can transfer to the new language the system of meanings he already possesses in his own. The reverse is also true – a foreign language facilitates mastering the higher forms of the native language. The child learns to see his native language as one particular system among many, to view its phenomena under more general categories and this leads to awareness of his linguistic operations.*

According to Vygotsky, the existence of the child's mother tongue is a facilitating factor in the process of learning a new language, but – we should add – only if the approach to teaching and the teacher treat it as such. *The system of meanings* the child has acquired in their mother tongue needs to be transferred to the new language with explanations of all the differences between the two languages. The differences between Croatian and English, as between any first and any target language, exist on all linguistic levels. Even on the phonetic level, in spite of children's unsurpassed ability to imitate the foreign phonetic system, it may well happen that, due to the very limited input they receive in the English classes, the child hears and pronounces the nearest

approximation to their Croatian phonemes, and instead of using the unknown /ð/ it will use the Croatian /d/ or /z/ (e.g., in *mother* and *father*).

If the teacher does not make an effort to explain that *I have lived in Zagreb for ten years* does not denote a past action as when the perfect tense is used in Croatian, the learner will identify the function of the two respective structures as the same, which will result in an erroneous expression. The same is true of **black bread*, **young potatoes* and **black wine* on the semantic level. In these, as in many more other cases, the two languages must be contrasted and the learners informed about the differences.

Psychologically, it is sometimes useful to stress that *sameness* of the two languages in certain respects (e.g., in *English*, as in *Croatian*, *thoughts are expressed in sentences which start with a capital letter and end with a full stop*).

Translation exercises from the first into the target language or vice versa can be of great help if the teacher wants to make sure that the correct meaning of a word or an utterance has found the way to the learners.

On the other hand, class interaction of all kinds should be conducted in the target language with the first language coming in as a welcome help to prevent the breach of communication, be it on the level of the word, structure or discourse.

6. Sociocultural categories should be contrasted.

Sometimes young learners have problems in understanding sociocultural conventions that are different in the two languages.

They should be familiarised with some of them even at the early stages of learning. The obvious example is *Hello!* used as a greeting in English as opposed to the Croatian telephone entry *Halo!*

The story of *you* as a pronoun used for both singular and plural should also be revealed to the learners as well as the strange character of the personal pronoun of the first person singular (I) that appears in writing in the shape of a vertical line. Addressing and greeting people and the conventions that accompany these functions should also be clarified and the differences between the two cultures stressed. Some way or other it is a common belief that all these minor matters of language and culture need no clarification and hence so many unidiomatic and erroneous uses in the repertoire of our learners and speakers of English.

By trying to take care of the listed conditions and perhaps adding some more in teaching children elements of grammar, we may hope that one day it will help them to internalise the grammar system to such an extent that they will be able to use the foreign idiom in a near-native way in their life and vocation.

According to Piaget (1973) children after the age of 12 gradually develop into abstract thinkers capable of understanding linguistic processes at work in the grammatical system of a language. The grammar of a foreign language (including its terminol-

ogy) to an adolescent can be quite comprehensible if presented in the right way. What is *the right way* is still questionable. What we are sure of is that there is more than one *right way*, depending on many factors such as the personality traits of a person, attitudes towards this foreign language, motivation to learn, language anxiety, conditions of learning, etc. Recent studies on the strategies of learning have shed more light on these questions.

On the other hand, we can state with a certain amount of certainty what the wrong way is: It is the learning by heart of grammatical rules and paradigms to win a mark at school, which used to be an established routine in traditional schools.

Hopefully, 21st century schools will never again resort to such methods.

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