

TEACHING GRAMMAR IN TEACHING PRACTICE
(BASED ON EXPERIENCE GAINED DURING POST-DOC MOBILITY
PROGRAM IN PORTO UNIVERSITY, PORTUGAL)

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Grammar is central to the teaching and learning of languages. It is also one of the most difficult aspects of language to teach well.

Many people, including language teachers, hear the word "grammar" and think of a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage. They associate "good" grammar with the prestige forms of the language, such as those used in writing and in formal oral presentations, and "bad" or "no" grammar with the language used in everyday conversation or used by speakers of nonprestige forms.

To our mind in Teachers Training Universities grammar should be taught from several perspectives. We will try to clear these perspectives on the example of our experience gained during post-doc mobility program in Porto University.

Studying the curriculum in Porto University we found out that there is no separate clear course based on teaching grammar. Students, combined into groups according to their general knowledge of language, have different grammatical background. Mostly it depends on their secondary education, school curriculum and teacher's preferences. Some of them studied grammar through explaining the forms and rules and then drilling on them. Such students can produce correct forms on exercises and tests, but consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context.

The second group of students has very elementary grammatical knowledge. Their language teachers, influenced by recent theoretical work on the difference between language learning and language acquisition, tended not to teach grammar at all. Believing that children acquire their first language without overt grammar instruction, they expected students to learn their second language the same way. They assumed that students will absorb grammar rules as they hear, read, and use the language in communication activities.

Taking into account different grammatical background of their students, teachers in Porto University teach grammar in a traditional deductive way, but not as a separate course, but as a logical part of English practice classes. In general, the whole foreign language education is based on a coursebook “Global English”, which is enough to develop good communicative skills. The coursebook proposes active and interesting training of listening, writing and reading, but grammar, traditionally, is taught as an abstract system and is based on usual drilling.

We should also mention that there is no habit to control students learning every lesson. Students are not supposed to learn rules by heart and present next lesson to get a mark. All grammar training is done during the lesson, and even if they have something to do at home, nobody will check your personal effort. All system is based on test evaluative principle; the work between tests is students’ personal responsibility and desire. For this reason, grammar classes look more like training to use words and structures in well-known context than teaching to use grammar in general. Grammar tests also include only familiar patterns; nothing out of trained context will be included.

Some students have additional grammatical training during the course “English Linguistics”. When we saw the course in the curriculum we expected to have the introduction to language theory. In reality, English Linguistics has very practical grammar character. It happened, because this course is obligatory for students of different specialities, which very often have little connection to philology. So, students have low motivation and are not interested in the subject at all. For this reason, it is better to give students knowledge which they can use in communication than to speak about something, which will be a “dead burden” in their educational background.

As we can see, in Porto University the teacher is facilitating students to do their own learning rather than using the 'top down' approach of dictating rules to the class. While it is imperative that students learn the rules and forms of grammar, this is not an effective method of teaching grammar, they think. It tends to result in

a classroom full of bored and uninterested students who know how to produce excellent results in exercises and on tests, but fail badly at using the language in contextual situations.