

Avis de Recherche

Grammar: a step forward?

Around 20 teachers met up in London, last April, to start a course organised by CILT : “*Teaching Methodology for Advanced French, Dealing with Advanced Grammar in a Communicative Context*”. In my opinion, grammar is often regarded with mixed feelings by both students and teachers and the number of new grammar books for French which have been published in the last five years seems to indicate that it has become a very topical subject again. During this preliminary meeting, questions such as “What is grammar competence?” or perhaps, more crucially, “Why has it become such a source of anxiety?”, were put to the group. The view that there was perhaps over-reliance at GCSE level, on learning by heart ready-made sentences, without students’ understanding how to structure and construct sentences, was largely shared. In order to prepare ourselves for the second part of the course, a one-week workshop in June at the *Centre International d’Études Pédagogiques* in Sèvres, small self-selected groups started exploring a number of issues which would eventually be useful to all of us and beneficial to our students. Our group of four brought together people from the Universities of Lincolnshire and Humberside, Portsmouth, Central England and East Surrey College. We fairly quickly identified common problems and common needs. In many instances, languages were not the main component of students’ programmes of studies. Many students had experienced failure in their learning of French before they came to us and motivation was not always very strong. Irregular attendance was also identified as a common problem.

While other groups decided to concentrate on writing units designed to teach specific grammatical points (e.g. the use of pronouns), our objectives were different. We felt very strongly that our students did not need more formal explanations of grammar rules. Our students had set views on their own grammar expertise and were in general convinced that they were not competent. Interestingly, our teaching experience over the years had revealed that the vast majority of first year undergraduates always express a strong desire for more grammar at the beginning of their course. They identify grammar as the key to their success in mastering the study of the language. It is to them a necessary evil.

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It is almost as if first-year students share new hopes of understanding grammar at long last. Coming to a new place and starting undergraduate studies correspond to promises of a fresh start and perhaps for them the chance to grasp and master all these forbidding grammar concepts. It is however also the case that when asked on which area of the language in particular they need more help, the vast majority of *final* level students this time, ask for more grammar. This is quite disheartening! It appears that we are failing our students in that their expectations are not met. It is essential to understand why students in general find grammar so difficult to grasp. And perhaps even more problematic, why is it that attendance at grammar sessions is so poor, even among students who have identified this area of study as necessary? Teaching grammar can often be an unrewarding experience. Whether we adopt conventional methods or try to be novel in our approach, (e.g. by using a thematic approach), the result appears to be the same. The vast majority of students still regards grammar as an unreachable goal.

This led our group to reflect on the definition of grammatical competence. Students do not have insurmountable difficulties in understanding grammatical concepts once they are explained to them. The main difficulty lies in their remembering to use them correctly. This in turn is largely because of the insufficient number of weekly classes in which students can practise using the language. We defined grammatical competence as the ability to understand, remember *and use* grammatical concepts correctly in appropriate contexts. We then turned our attention to the task at hand, our project for the coming week in Sèvres.

We needed a new approach to teaching grammar. Another common factor we established was that our contact time with students had been eroded over the last few years and if anything, this trend was to continue downwards. The time we could realistically spend on grammar with any class was twenty minutes only a week. Twenty-four teaching weeks was usually the norm. Also, in many institutions, independent learning is actively promoted through the use of language centres. Students still need guidance on which course or computer software to access. Once they become used to this new learning method, it is always most surprising to see how enthusiastic they are at performing the most repetitive, drill-based activities, especially if on computers. Methods which, if used in class, would guarantee no attendance at all, seem to become attractive

once students are in charge. We decided that our project should focus on how to encourage first year post A-Level students, or those with a roughly equivalent level, to work on grammar independently and successfully. To achieve this, it was obvious that the grammar programme we had in mind had to be tailor-made to students' individual needs. Moreover, students had to be in charge and their study of grammar had to be an on-going process which they saw as an integral part of the study of the language. We opted for an individual log-book which would be part of students' study of French for at least a year and preferably the duration of their stay at University.

Our programme of work included:

1. *Self-evaluation questionnaire* in which students reflect on their experience of learning grammar so far and on their level of competence. This is the first stage of the programme and it serves two purposes. Students are asked among other things to comment on the appropriateness of corrections they have been given in the past on their oral and written work. Other questions include whether they prefer grammar to be explained to them in English or in the foreign language. This is obviously to allow the teacher to adapt his/her methodology to suit students' needs. This questionnaire is also used to stress that grammatical competence will only be achieved if students are prepared to spend enough time on their work. A contract is therefore established from the start. It is based on students' acceptance of the need to devote the required time and effort to their studies and on teachers' taking students' wishes into account and adapting their grammar programme to suit individual needs.

2. *A diagnostic test* designed to assess their current strengths and weaknesses. Students are presented with a text chosen in the first place for its entertaining value. Having hopefully caught their interest, they are asked to answer some questions about the text. The exercises include working on the following :

- verbs (Perfect, Present, Future, Imperfect, Pluperfect, Conditional, Subjunctive)
- reflexive verbs
- negatives
- pronouns
- adjectives
- agreement of past participles

- infinitive constructions
- avoidance of _____'s in French (e.g. *The student's choice*)

We thought it essential to keep the link between grammar and communication. By contextualising the grammar exercises, it is hoped that students do not disassociate grammar from language learning as a whole. It is too often the case, unfortunately, that students have difficulties in applying grammar rules. Ideally, communication, spontaneity of expression and grammar need to be given equal emphasis in order to produce fluent and confident foreign language speakers. The cartoon below illustrates only too well what years of learning a foreign language can represent to students.

Prioritising communication however has made it very difficult for people intending to continue their language studies after GCSE. Often unaware of numerous and complex grammar rules, many students find it difficult to bridge the gap between GCSE level and more advanced studies.

3. *Self-evaluation of the diagnostic test and individual action plan.* After correcting their own test, students identify precisely in which areas they need to work. It is becoming increasingly the case that students' needs are varied. First year intakes assemble students from all directions. Many are highly proficient in speaking the language but their written skills are seriously flawed. Others are mature students who studied French some time ago. Others still are very good linguists performing at a high standard and needing to polish their grammatical accuracy. More and more foreign students come to study here (German, Swedish, Belgian, Italian, Greek) and they do not share, on the whole, the same difficulties as British students. It is therefore essential to devise a programme of work directly suited to each student.

4. *Guidance on available work-packs and/or software.* Once students have identified their problem areas and ideally been able to discuss them with a tutor, they are given some guidance on which programmes or particular exercises to do. For instance, they are provided with sheets listing precisely where to find exercises to practise the use of pronouns. They will then add new references to this initial list and keep their log-book up-to-date.

It is necessary to add at this juncture that it was felt important to familiarise students with a certain amount of grammatical jargon. Grammatical terms are largely used in manuals and computer software and students need to refer to them. Many students are not accustomed to these terms and it was felt desirable to explain them in context. A list is therefore given to students with different grammar components underlined and identified in the context of a French sentence.

It is important to note that the log-book is not to become a compilation of all the work undertaken independently. It would soon become unmanageable and the aim is not to prove to lecturers that students have spent so many hours on a particular grammar exercise. Our objectives are more ambitious. We want students to reflect on the exercises they have done, point out references of exercises which have been most useful to them and share this information with others. We want them to become involved in the understanding of grammar by having to explain to others why they suddenly understood a particular grammar point which had, until now, defeated them. This sort of feedback could be integrated into some 'normal' sessions. For instance, students could be asked to explain some grammar points to the rest of the class. This would be done on an informal basis and would contribute to building up self-confidence. The log-book is intended to become a very personal tool for learning grammar, easy to refer to and hopefully corresponding exactly to each student's needs. Furthermore, its monitoring must be built into the assessment pattern of the language course, to ensure that it is taken seriously by students and kept up-to-date on a regular basis.

In conclusion, I believe that such a project fits in well with the focus on transferable skills recommended by the Dearing Report. It should, hopefully, enable students to identify the skills they need, develop them and monitor that development. I intend to pilot the project in 1998-99 and await the outcomes with interest.

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