The effectiveness of the context-based aproach in teaching grammar
Efivacitatea abordării bazate pe context în predarea gramaticii

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Abstract

The paper aims at proving the effectiveness of the context-based approach in teaching grammar. It looks at the principles, methods and the steps towards the improvement of grammatical competence or accuracy and all its components. The study is based on an experiment with a pretest-posttest and control group. The subjects of the research are second year students, whose major is English and are B2 level. The control group was taught using the traditional approach to teaching grammar, while the experimental group was instructed with the help of the context-based approach. The results indicate the efficacy of teaching grammar in context.

Rezumat

Lucrarea îşi propune să demonstreze eficacitatea abordării demersului didactic bazat pe context în predarea gramaticii. Se analizează principiile, metodele și pașii realizați pentru îmbunătățirea competenței sau corectitudinii gramaticale și a tuturor componentelor acesteia. Studiul se bazează pe un experiment cu un grup de control pretest-posttest. Subiecții cercetării sunt studenți la anul II, a căror specializare este limba engleză și care au nivel B2. Grupul de control a fost instruit utilizându-se abordarea tradițională a predării gramaticii, în timp ce grupul experimental a fost instruit cu ajutorul abordării bazate pe context. Rezultatele indică eficacitatea predării gramaticii în context.

Across the various languages and subsystems of grammar, perhaps the most widely practised traditional approach to grammatical instruction has been portrayed as the three Ps- present, practice and produce [5, p. 523]. Long and Doughty, criticizing the three Ps model, state that the traditional approach has some disadvantages. One of the

most trenchant criticisms of this approach is that students fail to apply their knowledge of grammar when they are communicating. Students know the grammar – at least, they know the rules explicitly – but they fail to apply them in communication. This problem has been discussed by others as the non-interface problem, in that there is no apparent connection between explicit knowledge of the rules and implicit control of the system, and the learnability problem following from the observation that grammar is not learned in a linear and atomistic fashion [6, p. 521]. In this approach, students are unable to use the grammar rules in speech. They do not understand how grammar rules work in a sentence. Learning grammar in context will allow learners to see how rules can be used in sentences, because language is context-sensitive, which means that, in the absence of context, it is very difficult to recover the intended meaning of a single word or phrase [9, p. 69].

Harmer claims that the teacher's chief task when teaching grammar is to show the students what the language means and how it is used; s/he must also show them what the grammatical form of the new language is and how it is said and written [4, p. 56].

Teaching grammar in context will give learners an opportunity to understand how language works and this will improve their communication skills. Accuracy in

language acquisition plays an important role to understand both speaking and writing performances. Context gives a more precise understanding of how to use the grammar, and provides accuracy in the studied language both in oral and written skills [10, p. 6].

Presenting grammar in isolated sentences will not allow learners to see how grammatical structures function in communicative situations. By dealing with related units of information rather than isolated bits, more efficient processing becomes possible [7, p. 138]. Context-based instruction has always been useful for learners. Students need to learn language in logical contexts, either through authentic discourse-length input or through language learning materials that stimulate authentic input using sentences that follow in logical sequence [3, p. 152].

In another criticism of teaching grammar through isolated sentences, Nunan writes that in textbooks, grammar is very often presented out of context. Learners are given isolated sentences, which they are expected to internalize through exercises, involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation [8, p. 102].

Teaching grammar in context provides a meaningful framework that connects to reality in the target language [1, p. 11]. Stressing the advantage of teaching

grammar in context, Nunan reiterates the need for an approach through which students can learn how to form structures correctly, and also how to use them to communicate meaning. If learners are not given opportunities to explore grammar in context, it will be difficult for them to see how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings [8, p. 103].

Byrd states that when grammar is studied as arising from context, then a variety of forms emerges as essential to the expression of particular meanings in particular discourse contexts [2]. It's not just that different types of verbs are related to each other but that in particular kinds of discourse the idea of, relationship must be expanded to include the bond among verbs, nouns, adverbs, textual order, and even particular vocabulary [2, p. 54].

The purpose of the study described below is to prove the effectiveness of context-based instruction when teaching grammar and how it contributes to the development of the grammatical competence or grammatical accuracy, as it is referred to in the CEFL, 2018, and which in its turn leads to a much-improved communicative competence as a whole.

The target population of this study consisted of second-year students, who had a B2 level, of "Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University. The students were divided into two groups, which in fact coincided with their academic groups – 202 English/Italian group (17 students) was the control group and 203 English/German (22 students) group was the experimental group. The experiment lasted for a whole semester, which is 15 weeks, and during which the syllabus for the course Basics of Grammar was completed.

Based on the research design chosen, the procedure consisted of three phases: pre-test, treatment, and posttest. The pre-test was given to both groups, but designing lesson plans and applying the context-based approach were only addressed to the experimental group. After the treatment period, one semester, the posttest was administered to the two groups. Briefly, the procedures of the research were as follows:

1. The administration of the pretest was to measure all the components of the grammatical competence/accuracy: knowledge, skills and awareness and confirm the level of the students, B2. The test was fulfilled by both groups. The purpose of assessing both groups' results was to prove the effectiveness of teaching grammar in context by comparing between pretest and posttest' scores, whether there was a significant difference between the results of the control group and those of the experimental one.

2. In the experimental group the lessons were designed according to the context-based approach principles, which involved self-regulated learning, collaboration, problem-solving, critical and creative thinking and authentic assessment. Conversely, in the control group the instructional process occurred by using the traditional way, the main element being separate sentences which were not part of a large context.

3. The administration of the post-test for the two groups was used to measure the components of their grammatical accuracy and the degree of the effectiveness of teaching grammar in context was determined by using a test done with the help of Wizer.me to compare the mean scores of the two groups. It is worth mentioning that the content of the post-test was different from the pre-test, done according to the syllabus for the second year students, while the format of the questions was the same.

The pre-test phase implied students' completing a test that consisted of six items based on the syllabus from the previous semester. The first item checked students' grammar knowledge of the topics studied, namely how well they knew the use and the structure of Perfect Tense forms. The second one tested the students' language skills as they had to fill in the gaps with an appropriate past tense form. The third and fourth questions were intended at evaluating receptive skills: for task three they had to read a text and underline all the present tense forms and for task four they had to listen and write down all the future tense forms they heard. Questions five and six aimed at assessing their production skill and grammatical awareness by giving one written answer to the question *What are your plans for the next 20 years?,* which made them use as many future forms as possible; and one oral answer to the question *What were you like as a child?*, in which they had to include expressions for past habits. The oral answer was also evaluated from the perspective of fluency of speech and ideas, automaticity with control of basic and complex structures, error control – how well they felt when they made a mistake and corrected it, and intelligibility of the answer. All the requirements were formulated in accordance with the CEFL, 2018.

The results are presented in the table below. The first four questions were marked automatically by the application, while the answers to the fifth and sixth were evaluated and marked by the teacher. The results are measured by the mean mark for each group.
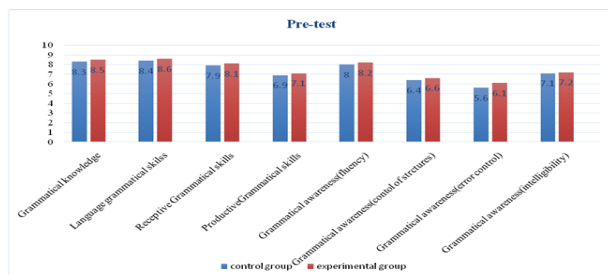
Figure 1. Pre-Test

The results clearly show that the students had very good grammatical knowledge, the average mark per each group being 8.3 and 8.5 respectively. Regarding the grammatical skill, the results reveal that the level of their grammatical language skills was quite good – 8.4 and 8.6. The same can be stated about the receptive grammatical skills –7.9 and 8.1, which proves the fact the students had a fair level of reading and listening comprehension and could recognize the structures in both reading and listening passages. However, the results for productive grammatical skills left much to be desired – students made quite a few mistakes in the usage of the required grammatical structures while giving their oral and written answers to the questions assigned – 6.9 and 7.1. With regard to grammatical awareness, the results were poor except for the fluency – 8.0 and 8.2, which was more probably due the psychological factors, students having become more confident in English and consequently less shy owing to the fact that they possessed some knowledge of the language. It should be pointed out, though,

that they had a good command of simple language structures but a poor one of some complex grammatical forms, they tended to use complex structures rigidly with some inaccuracy. The same situation applies to error control – very few of the students felt when they made mistakes and corrected themselves. The results registered here are 6.4 and 6.6 for control of basic and complex structures and 5.6 and 6.1 for error control. The result for the intelligibility of the oral and written answers was a bit higher, the obstacle for a good result being the incorrect usage and the limited variety of the grammatical structures – 7.1 and 7.2.

In *the treatment or experimental phase* the students were submitted to grammar teaching according to the syllabus for the second year of study, B1+ or B2 level, but in different ways. The control group was taught the traditional way using the deductive and explicit approach to teaching grammar, which are mainly teacher-centered – the teacher does all the explanation without any involvement from the students' part and much controlled practice, which imply grammar exercises from the books such as *Grammarway* by Jenny Dooley & Virginia Evans, *Grammar Spectrum*, *English Grammar in Use,* the Murphy edition, *Oxford Practice Grammar* and *Macmillan English Grammar In Context* by Michael Vince. At the production stage

they had to just make up sentences using the taught grammatical structure or find in the Internet examples that contained it. All these activities are provided at the end of the unit. The focus is mainly on the grammatical knowledge and students' receptive grammatical skill which take less time to develop and easier to evaluate.

The experimental group was taught using the context-based approach. The lessons were student-centered, students being the ones who discovered the rules and made use of them while developing their grammatical skills. The students were exposed to inductive and explicit teaching, presented much of the authentic context in which the grammatical structure taught can be used, in such a way giving lots of meaning to them not just regarded by students as another bunch of useless rules and structures to learn for the sake of the final exam or evaluation papers. At the practice stage, the same sources were used as the ones for the control group and some online tools for checking students' progress: Quizalize, Liveworksheets, Quizizz, Studystack, Testmoz, Kahoot, LearningApps and Wizer.me.

At the production stage, in order to develop the grammatical production skills, especially the speaking one, some of online tools were used, such as Voki, SpeakPipe, Vocaroo, Voicespice and Flipgrid. Students had to give their answers to questions that require the usage of a certain grammatical structure. The students created oral presentations with the help of Screencastify and Screencast-O-Matic. For written assignments, the following tools were used Glogster, with the help of which students created posters and leaflets; Storyjumper, Bookcreator and Flipsnack were used to write stories, guidebooks and memory books. The students were involved in the activities as they all could get feedback and knew the progress they were making. The most important, though, was the fact that they were motivated to learn and keen to fulfill all the assignments in order to achieve success and improve their grammatical accuracy and thus their communicative competence. The students were encouraged to read books and watch films in English, as they started to more easily comprehend complex grammatical structures as a result of going through the experience of being taught grammar using the contextualized approach. The sources of inspiration for the activities used at all the stages of the PPP model served the following books: Speakout Upper-Intermediate and English File Upper-Intermediate, the fourth edition.

The post-test phase consisted in students' taking a test to see how they advanced in their improving the grammatical accuracy/competence. The format and the

aim of the post-test were the same: six questions to evaluate all the components of the grammatical accuracy/competence and to compare the results of both groups – the control and experimental ones – after going through the **treatment phase**. The content of the questions were different, because the students had to complete the syllabus for the second year of study. For question one they had to write the structure of conditional sentences (I, II, III and mixed). The second one asked them to fill in the correct form of the verb: gerund or infinitive, which tested their language skills. The third question asked them to underline all the relative clauses and for question four they had to listen and write down the conditional sentences. Both questions checked learners' receptive grammatical skills. For item five students had to write an answer the question *Describe a person you are most close to in your family using both defining and non-defining relative sentences* and for question six they had to give an oral answer *What would you do if you saw a woman being mugged in the street on the way home?*. Questions five and six were intended at evaluating students' production skills. The results are presented below.
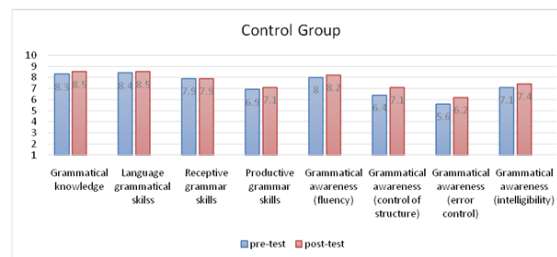

Figure 2. Control group

We can see a slight improvement in the results of the control group, which could have occurred on the account of the fact that students gained more knowledge at other English subjects, thus becoming more confident.

However, we notice impressive results in the experimental group, especially regarding fluency, control of grammatical structures and errors. This fact has led to considerable improvement of the intelligibility of the spoken and written answers.
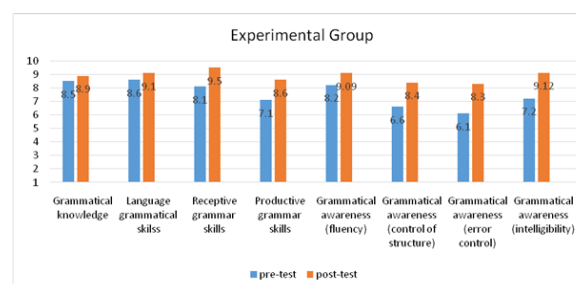

Figure 3. Experimental group

Regarding the grammatical knowledge there is small difference between the pre-test and post-test results. Nevertheless, the progress in the experimental group is better, increasing by 0,4 compared to the control group which is just 0,2.
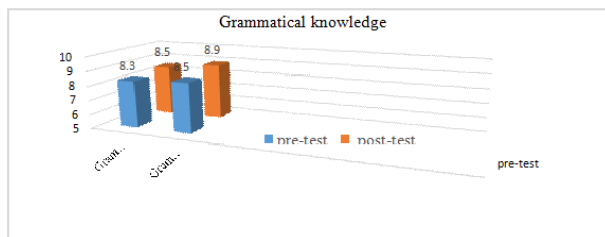
Figure 4. Grammatical knowledge

Considerable improvements have been registered regarding grammatical skills, especially productive and receptive ones, which speak for the fact that students recognize the grammar structures taught in reading and listening passages and are able to use them more freely in both oral and written speech. We see an increase of 1,5 points for productive grammar skills and 1,4 for receptive grammar ones.
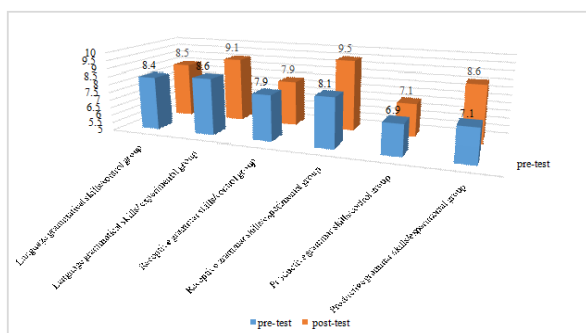

Figure 5. Grammatical skills

Grammatical awareness has become much better: students expressed their ideas more fluently, their control of basic and complex structures was less rigid, they controlled their language errors, the majority of them felt when they made mistakes and corrected themselves immediately. All these, of course, lead to a higher intelligibility of both their written and oral answers.
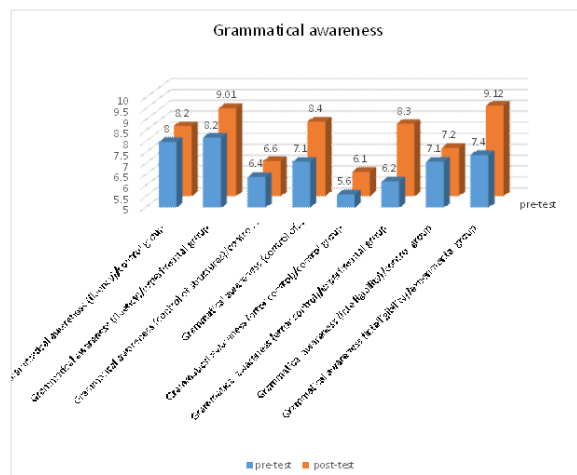

Figure 6. Grammatical awareness

The study has proven that teaching grammar by using the context-based approach has a great impact in our case on the development of the grammatical accuracy, which in its turn has lead to the development of communicative competence. A contextualized grammar pedagogy construes grammar as a series of consciously chosen meaning-making patterns, not an arbitrary list of rules and constraints. It foregrounds the idea that grammar is about choice; that writers (and speakers), in our case – students, make conscious choices regarding the linguistic patterns they use.

Teaching grammar in context involves making connections between grammatical patterns and the meaning of texts; wider contextual aspects such as genre, audience, subject and purpose; a reader's feelings and responses to a text; potential authorial motivations for making decisions about language choices. It avoids both

'feature spotting' and 'formulaic' grammar teaching, i.e. the falsehood that 'descriptive writing is full of adjectives' and 'verbs are doing words', for example.

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