TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO STUDENTS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to present how grammar is taught in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course with regard to the available learning conditions. It describes learning environment and students' differences at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Belgrade. The paper also briefly reflects the importance of grammar instruction in an ESP course, the factors which influence successful learning, the importance of corrective feedback and limitations of formal instruction.*

Key words: *grammar, English for Specific Purposes, Special Education and Rehabilitation, motivation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Grammar is usually not the main aim of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. ESP courses typically concentrate on topics and vocabulary relevant to a specific field (e.g. Medicine, Business, Technology, etc.). However, it would be wrong to assume that teaching grammar is irrelevant in ESP classes. Dudley-Evans and ST John (1998) suggest that when difficulties with grammatical structures interfere with students' receptive and productive skills, these difficulties should be dealt with in an ESP class. The extent to which grammatical structures will be explained and practiced depends on the students' proficiency level and whether the main focus of the lesson is accuracy or fluency. "If priority is given to accuracy, then direct teaching of grammatical forms to express particular meanings will be required" (Dudley-Evans and ST John 1998:74-5).

DeKeyser (1998, cited in Doughty and Williams 1998) mentions how some theoreticians argue that explicit teaching of grammar is fruitless and that "the teacher should provide students with large amounts of language input that is just easy enough for them to understand; they will then induce the rules from this "comprehensible input" without any conscious learning, just as is the case for first language learning." (DeKeyser 1998 cited in Doughty and Williams 1998:56) While this implicit learning may function well with very young learners, when the process of learning a foreign language is similar to that of learning the first language, that is not the case with adult learners, especially those who are at elementary or intermediate level of proficiency. They need to be taught new grammatical structures explicitly. Therefore, formal instruction, regardless of its limitations which will be dealt with later, is an integral part of ESP classes. Richards (2003) lists several reasons why grammar remains a core component of many language courses: "Teaching a language through its grammar represents a familiar approach to teaching for many people; grammar provides a convenient framework for a course; grammar can readily be linked to other strands of a syllabus, such as functions, topics

or situation; grammar represents a core component of language proficiency."(Richards 2003:153-4).

2. ENGLISH AT THE FACULTY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION

English is an obligatory course for first year students of Special Education and Rehabilitation at the University of Belgrade. The course is designed as an ESP course with the main aim to familiarize students with the relevant professional vocabulary. It is organized around different topics related to the fields of study at the Faculty: Speech Pathology, Prevention and Treatment of Behavioral Disorders, Special Education and Rehabilitation of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities, Special Education and Rehabilitation of Individuals with Physical Disabilities, Special Education and Rehabilitation of Individuals with Hearing Impairments, and Special Education and Rehabilitation of Individuals with Visual Impairments.

Another objective of this ESP course is to repeat and further practice appropriate grammatical structures. ESP courses are usually designed for adult learners at intermediate or advanced level of proficiency. However, learning conditions at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation make organizing this course and realizing its goals a truly challenging task.

Special Education students have three lessons once a week. Each year the Faculty enrolls about 270 first year students at six different departments, and they all take English together. There are usually more than 100 students present in class. Furthermore, these students come from different social backgrounds; they are usually, but not necessarily, 19 year-old high school graduates who finished different secondary schools (grammar schools or specialized secondary schools); some of them are highly motivated and eager to learn, while others (typically those at lower proficiency levels) show a complete lack of motivation; some are barely at elementary level of proficiency, while others may be classified as advanced learners, etc.

Teaching grammar to such a heterogeneous class depends on different factors. Available time, socio-economic status, motivation, aptitude, proficiency level and nature of the instruction can influence the choice of teaching method as well as the results achieved. John Carroll (1974) defined foreign language learning aptitude as "some characteristic of an individual which controls, at a given point of time, the rate of progress that he will make subsequently in learning a foreign language" (Carroll 1974 cited in Sawyer and Ranta 2001:320). According to him, learners with aptitude learn the fastest. However, Dornyei (1998) suggests that students' high motivation can make up for deficiencies in their language aptitude and in learning conditions. According to him, motivation is "one of the key factors that influence the rate of success of second/foreign language (L2) learning" (Dornyei 1998:117). Some theoreticians also mention positive task and goal orientation, high aspirations, ego and perseverance as good learner characteristics (Naiman et al. 1978 cited in Harmer 2001). Students of Special Education and Rehabilitation differ dramatically in their acquisition rates, motivation and their ultimate achievement. No single solution can be applied always, and not everyone will be happy all the time, which means that different students will find different lessons useful. However, as Harmer (2001) suggests "if we are aware of this and act accordingly, then there is a good chance that most of the class will be engaged with the learning process

most of the time" (Harmer 2001:50). Furthermore, learning environment, which can also have a powerful influence on students' motivation, is far from ideal at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. That is why it is important to create an emotional atmosphere that is supportive, cooperative, and suits the needs of different students (Harmer 2001), especially in such extremely numerous and heterogeneous class.

3. TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO STUDENTS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION

The approach to teaching grammar in this ESP course is structural - as opposed to the "nominal" approach concerned only with meaning, i.e. nominal definition of a syntactic category. Huddleston (1984) formulates the grammar of a language as a "set of rules which specify the form of words (morphology) and the way words combine to make sentences (syntax)" (Huddleston 1984:50). Nominal definitions of grammatical categories do not always match their morphological and syntactical characteristics. Thus, the structural approach "defines categories by reference to their place within the grammar, to the rules in which they figure, to the relationships between them" (Huddleston 1984:54). This method teaches students about various sentence patterns and the roles of different words within sentences.

In the past ESP courses were not designed for low-level learners of English. Nowadays, however, many ESP courses are aimed at pre-intermediate and intermediate level learners (Day and Krzanowski 2011).

The course materials used for first year students of Special Education and Rehabilitation are adapted to the needs and objectives of students at A2-B1 level of proficiency (Council of Europe 2002) since most of the students are between these two levels at the beginning of the course. The texts are not longer than 500 words each, and cover the topics related to the students' field of study, followed by appropriate comprehension and vocabulary exercises.

Grammar structures repeated and further practiced throughout this course include the following: *Present Simple and Continuous, Past Simple and Continuous, Present Perfect, Past Perfect, The Future, Modal Verbs, Conditional Clauses, Subjunctive, Passive Voice, Reported Speech, Relative Clauses, Adjectives, Adverbs, Articles, Prepositions, Phrasal and Prepositional Verbs*.

All grammar exercises in the currently used course materials are related to one of the Special Education topics and are given in specific contexts relevant to the students' field of study. The selected grammar tasks present the grammar "in a rational, coherent pattern that is not limited to its use just in a particular type of communication" (Byrd 1997:11). Thus, apart from repeating and practicing grammar structures, these exercises provide further practice of relevant vocabulary covered in that specific unit. For example, the students practice different verb forms by choosing the correct answer in examples such as:

An exceptional learner needs/is needing special education and treatment.
Scientists are constantly making/constantly make progress in preventing some disabilities.
In the past, we focused/have focused on the differences between exceptional and non-exceptional learners.
Mary has never attended/was never attending a residential school.

Before John was identified as learning disabled, he had attended/attended a general class.
His abuse of alcohol and other substances will probably increase/is probably going to increase the risk of developing ADHD.
Comorbidity might be/must be present in students with behavioral disorders.
If she listened attentively when children speak, she would identify/would have identified their speech disorders.
She wishes her child wasn't/isn't deaf.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) make a list of key grammatical forms in ESP/ EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teaching, specifically in academic writing. According to them, grammatical forms predominantly used in academic writing are Present Simple (active and passive), Present Perfect, Past Passive, Modal verbs (such as may, might, could or would used for the purpose of *hedging*), certain uses of articles (e.g. no article in general statements with an uncountable noun, or the use of *'the'* with named methods, procedures, etc.), nominalization - use of verbal nouns for the purpose of making complex pieces of information simpler in form, logical connectors (e.g. moreover, however, therefore) which are crucial in understanding the logical relationships within texts. The ESP course at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation covers all of these through different texts and various vocabulary and grammar exercises. As Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) further suggest "The context determines what aspect of grammar is appropriate. Certain very specific contexts will involve very particular uses of grammar, and the ESP teacher needs to be sensitive to these contexts" (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:80)

4. FEEDBACK IN FORMAL INSTRUCTION

Corrective feedback is also a very important part of every language course. As Harmer (2001) points out, feedback is not only about correcting students, but it also assesses their success in a specific task. Grammar lessons are usually designed to practice and ensure students' accuracy. Different students respond to different feedback types differently. There are various ways of showing incorrectness (e.g. repeating, echoing, hinting, reformulating, etc.). Although "Elicitation and metalinguistic feedback proved to be noticeably the best ways of getting a self- or other-repair" (Tonkyn 1998:F58), it is not always possible for the students to find their own errors. That much depends on the students' proficiency level, but also on their motivation and aptitude. If they have absolutely no knowledge of the correct rule, then no kind of feedback will be effective. Similarly, if the learners are not motivated enough, again feedback will be irrelevant. It is very common that students just aim for communication and not accuracy. In other words, if they can get the message across it is not important to them how they do it. In a classroom of more than 100 students heterogeneous in their general English proficiency level, as well as in their aptitude and motivation to learn, it is very difficult to find the best form of giving feedback, and to determine the best time during a lesson to do it. Helen Johnson suggests (Johnson 1992 cited in Tonkyn 1998) that "a more fruitful time for remedial intervention would be during a *preparation* period for a task-based activity" (Johnson 1992 cited in Tonkyn 1998:F56). Although giving general suggestions or pointing out the most frequent mistakes for that task could be very useful at that point, it is not always possible to anticipate all errors students can make, especially when the learning conditions are as described above. Written input has proved to be useful in a

classroom as big as the one at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. All examples should be salient, written on the board, together with negative evidence (e.g. a crossed out example where that form wouldn't be used, but is a common mistake by the learners). Many learners have a photographic memory, thus written input helps them memorize new forms.

5. LIMITATIONS OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION

Probably one of the main limitations of formal instruction is lack of social/situational context in class. Exposure to authentic language input undoubtedly has an important role in language learning. However, exposure itself is not enough for successful learning process. Students first need to be instructed in order to be able to recognise specific forms outside the classroom. ESP classes are organized around specific topics and vocabulary. The main aim of such courses is for the students to be able to acquire, recognize and use specific language related to their field of study. The teaching materials used at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation attempt to provide students with contextualized language which is as authentic as possible with regard to the students' general English proficiency level. As Ellis (1994) suggests: "there is evidence to suggest that focusing learners' attention on forms, and the meanings they realize in the context of communicative activities, results in successful learning" (Ellis1994:659).

Another drawback often mentioned with regard to formal instruction is its short term effect. Ellis (1994) makes an assumption that the features forgotten "may be those which are not communicatively salient or important (e.g. –s morphemes), and so these are not kept alive merely by the teacher's use of them in the classroom after a period of focused instruction" (Ellis 1994 cited in Tonkyn 1998:F31). It is true that if lack of a certain feature doesn't impede communication, the students tend to forget that feature. Also, the structures which learners find difficult to acquire are usually the ones which they forget easily (for example Present Perfect or articles for Serbian learners, since there are no parallel forms in Serbian), while simpler ones (like copula BE) easily become automatic by means of focused practice.

Larsen-Freeman (1995, cited in Eckman et al. 1995:134) explains how backsliding can be just temporary, and it happens in order to allow for new structures to be acquired. This is what very often happens with copula BE in continuous forms or *going to future*. Learners concentrate on the new form being taught and omit BE which they have previously mastered. However, once they successfully learn the new structure they stop omitting the auxiliary verb.

Two other disadvantages of formal instruction are mentioned in Ellis (1994). The first is overgeneralization of some rules and using them where not required. The second disadvantage is making students too conservative, in other words not giving them enough space and freedom to manipulate the target language because they are restricted with rules.

6. CONCLUSION

Sometimes the problem with acquiring different forms is not related to formal instruction itself or its limitations. As already mentioned, there are many factors successful learning depends on. Learning environment, time and space available, the number of

students, their differences in socio-economic status, proficiency level and motivation all represent intervening variables which can influence the learning process and its results. The fact that at the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation ESP lessons are conducted once a week in a group of more than 100 students who are all very different in their personal characteristics, makes teaching an extremely challenging task. One of the aims of this ESP course is for the students to master grammar structures appropriate for intermediate (B1) level. Methods and tasks used for this purpose are all designed with regard to the difficulties the teacher and students encounter in the mentioned learning conditions with the attempt to make the best out of them.

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