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Teaching grammar in context and multilingual environment

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ABSTRACT

Multilingual environment has always been characteristic to Georgian reality. Today, due to current political or economic changes multilingualism has impacted the various fields including education. In this respect, Tbilisi State University is no exception, where the number of multilingual classes of ESL students of Azeri, Armenian and Georgian nationality is increasing. This process is accompanied by new challenges posed to the acquisition of the English language. The necessity of tackling these problems imposes responsibilities on English teachers, who are constantly engaged in the search for appropriate strategies and approaches fostering the proper learning process.

Having a good command of a foreign language implies the acquisition of new language items and the development of all the skills and sub skills that cannot be achieved without knowing grammar as an important component for developing the receptive and productive skills. The paper aims at finding the efficient ways of teaching grammar in multilingual environment. For this purpose, the problems related to learning grammatical structures are identified and analyzed and their solutions are suggested. Reviewing the advantages and drawbacks of applying various approaches and strategies, the paper singles out teaching grammar in context and supports its utilization in the multilingual classroom with the findings demonstrated by the experiment conducted.

The paper presents scholarly viewpoints regarding the above mentioned issues, inferences and concludes that the proper strategies, methods and approaches to teaching grammar should be determined considering the peculiarities of multilingual classroom so as to achieve the favourable learning outcomes.

Key words: *Grammar constructions, context, multilingual, strategies.*

Introduction

Multilingualism is a phenomenon accompanying the current globalization processes which have penetrated the various fields and aspects of life. Obviously, they have affected the education posing challenges to teaching foreign languages in multilingual classrooms. According to Poudel, “Multilingualism refers to the condition in which more than two languages are used in the same setting for similar purposes” (Poudel, 2010, p.121).

Challenges in multilingual classes and the goal of the paper

In multilingual classes learners speak different native languages, hence, the only language for communication is English which, at the same time, represents the target language for students to learn, this is the main reason causing the problems encountered in all the aspects

of teaching a language and hindering the achievement of linguistic as well as skill development goals.

Hence, ESL teachers have to comply with the core requirements emerged in the language learning process in multilingual setting at TSU as well, where the most prevailed multilingual classes consist of students of Azeri, Armenian and Georgian nationalities. Multilingual environment necessitates finding the appropriate strategies of Language teaching.

The challenges of teaching a foreign language for ESL teachers, are even more acutely felt in multilingual classrooms, because the common challenges of a foreign language acquisition such as linguistic and structural differences between the target language and a mother tongue, language knowledge level of students, differences in learners' characteristics and learning needs are added to the problems identified in the multilingual environment such as diverse national and linguistic backgrounds of students. A teacher has to seek for and select the strategies, methods and approaches of transferring the new language to students, so that it can be perceived, understood and acquired by each of the learners despite their national backgrounds.

The process of the second language learning encompasses all the linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, various lexical structures as well as the development of receptive and productive skills. The paper aims to single out the effective methods of teaching grammar in multilingual classroom as well as focuses on identifying the problems posed and finding the solutions to them

Significance and problems of teaching grammar in multilingual classes

We consider grammar to be the “cornerstone” of a language acquisition and the development of communicative skills. Understanding, mastering the grammar rules and constructions and their adaption to or usage in communication is essential to have a good command of a language. “Grammar is the weaving that creates the fabric” (Azar, 2007, as cited in Mart, 2013 p. 125). “Grammar teaching, can be defined as “any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it” (Ellis, 2006, as cited in Bikowski, 2018, p. 1). Accordingly, “helping students to have clear picture of language patterns and its rule are the goal of teaching grammar which aimed at producing practical linguistic (Souisa & Yanuarius, 2020, p. 1121) The significance of teaching grammar necessitates utilizing the effective

methods and strategies for transferring new grammar. For this purpose, it is essential to integrate the peculiarities of grammar teaching with those of multilingualism, which is associated with some challenges to be dealt with.

In order to find solutions to the difficulties related to grammar teaching in multilingual classroom, first of all, the reasons accounting for these problems should be identified. Relying on our experience gained in multilingual classrooms at TSU, the reasons conditioning the difficulties in teaching grammar are as follows: 1. Difference in the English language knowledge level- the only language used at the lesson is English, hence, the new language, or grammatical structures and constructions introduced and explained by the teacher, may not be well understood by every student. 2. Difference in linguistic backgrounds of the students. As Merita Ismaili suggests, “learners rely on their background experience and prior knowledge of their native language to acquire a second language” (Ismaili, 2015, p.199). In monolingual classes while explaining a certain grammatical pattern, we often refer to the similar linguistic structures existing in the mother tongue, find parallels and collate them with each other. This strategy greatly benefits learners to understand the new language, however, it is impossible to do in multilingual classes, as the sources and means facilitating the introduction and explanation of new grammar is confined to only the English language 3. Diverse cultural and social backgrounds – the examples of using grammatical structures and rules introduced by a teacher may not correspond to the cultural and social reality familiar to students of all the nationalities. 4. Lack of involvement –the low self-confidence conditioned by their national affiliation, feeling of belonging to national minority in the group, although groundlessly, leads them to being passive to participate in activities

The method of teaching grammar in context, its advantages and drawbacks

Occasioned by the above listed, teachers are faced with dilemma about which strategies and methods of teaching grammar to apply in the multilingual classroom. There have always been debates about how to teach grammar: deductively or inductively, focusing on the form or function, explicitly or implicitly, isolated or in context. Among the well-tried and accepted approaches we tend to apply the approach of teaching grammar in context, because, “language is context-sensitive” (Thornbury, 1999, as cited in Mart, 2013, p.125). As Mart states, “presenting grammar in isolated sentences will not allow learners to see how grammatical structures function in sentences (Mart, 2013, p.126). And the ”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” (Wajnryb, 1990, as cited in Mart, 2013, p. 126). According to David Nunan (Nunan, 1998, p. 103), learners “ need an approach through which they learn how to form structures correctly, and also how to use them to communicate meaning. Such a methodology [...] will show them how to achieve their communicative ends through the appropriate deployment of grammatical resources”. The approach of teaching grammar in context implies the application of inductive teaching, when students are provided with the texts or situations where they themselves identify the grammatical structure and with a teacher’s assistance determine its meaning and rule of usage in contrast to deductive teaching when a teacher gives the explicit explanation of the rule or grammatical structure which is followed by practicing exercises.

One more reason conditioning our preference is the following: students having entered the university have already acquired a certain level of English language knowledge, which provides the “safety” of presenting the new language items through the context to be understandable and comprehensible for students. However, it is worth noting, that the text should be straightforward, not overburdened with complicated grammatical structures, so as to allow learners focus their attention on perceiving new grammar.

The above mentioned characteristics of contextual teaching allows to determine the advantages of applying this approach in multilingual classrooms. First of all, comprehending the text as a whole enables students to familiarize themselves with grammar structures without realizing that they are new language, this can be compared to a child starting speaking in his native language, who is exposed to the new language in contextual way without explaining any grammar rules and structures. Secondly, the textual introduction as well as the provision of new grammar with the true-life examples and situations implied by this approach enables students to connect the form and function of a grammar term with each other and use them in reality in different situations and environment. In addition, this approach highlights the learner’s independence to understand, guess and grasp the meaning and usage of new grammar in his/her mother tongue without the “interference” of English. Furthermore, the mentioned approach offers the students of various nationality the equal opportunities to comprehend the new material that elevates the level of their involvement and motivation.

The drawback emerged while using this method in multilingual class is conditioned by different cultural and social backgrounds of students that may hamper multilingual learners from comprehending all types of situations, that’s why, the context for a grammar pattern

should be generalized as well as familiar and close to awareness of students with any national and religious backgrounds.

Experiment

In order to confirm the feasibility of contextual grammar teaching we conducted the experiment in a multilingual class. The target group consisted of 12 students, among them 6 were of Georgian nationality, 3 - Armenian and 3- Azeri students. The grammar material to be transferred was the passive voice. The acquisition of grammar was evaluated by the accuracy assessment quiz of 20 items comprising the usage of tenses, changing the sentences from active into the passive voice and vice versa, personal and impersonal passive. Students performance implying their involvement and motivation was evaluated by the observation method.

Diagram 1 illustrates the results of the experiment:

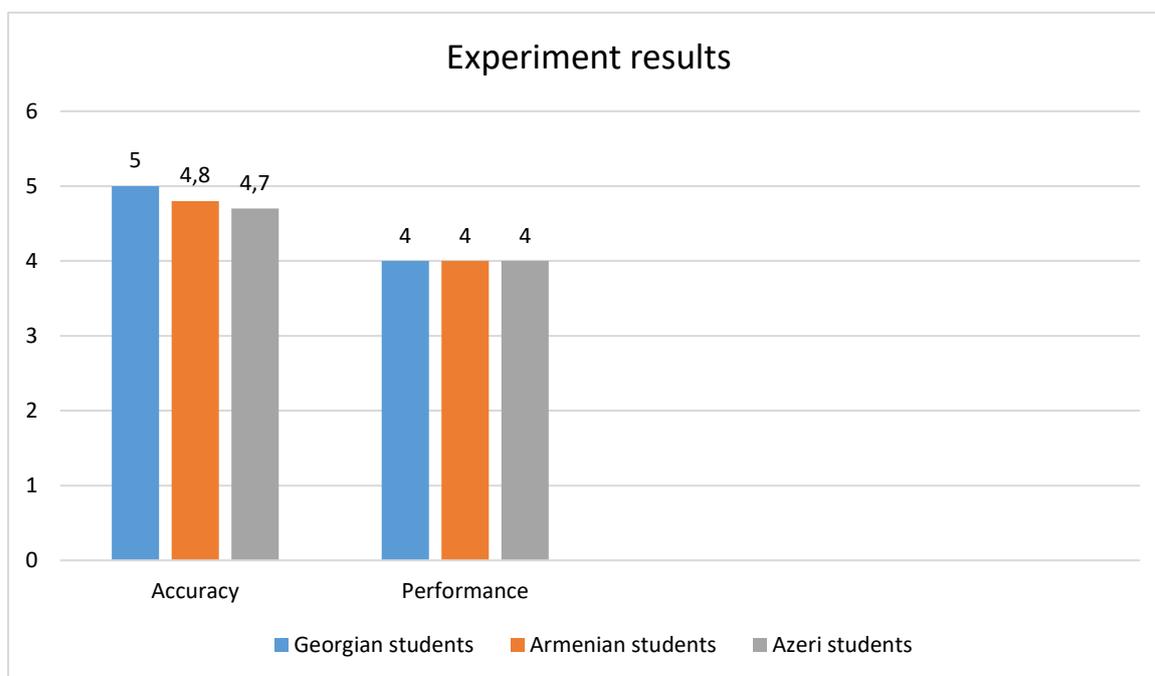


Diagram 1

So, on average, the assessment of students' accuracy showed more or less similar results demonstrating quite a high level of acquisition of passive voice

Learners observation revealed the equal level of involvement and motivation of students with all the three national backgrounds that was conditioned by their elevated self-confidence.

Conclusions

Occasioned by the experiment results we can infer that the contextual introduction of new grammatical structures benefit both the multilingual learners to grasp their meaning and essence without teacher's "interference" as well as the teachers to transfer new material. The teacher's role is increased in the other segments of a lesson that implies the additional clarification of the material and further controlled practice in using it.

Textual grammar teaching approach allows students to rely on their own knowledge and capability to comprehend the new grammar and its function as well as it can be considered to be students-centered.

Properly selected context providing multilingual students with the familiar reality facilitates the comprehensibility of the text, as a whole, and allows learners to focus their attention on new grammar patterns so as to perceive and understand them correctly. However, a teacher's role and assistance, which is revealed in giving necessary explanation and conducting the controlled practice, cannot be ignored.

Based on the fact that contextual grammar teaching offers equal opportunity to all the students to understand the grammatical structures transferred, the mentioned method elevates the level of self-confidence that, for its part, increases the involvement and motivation of multilingual students.

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