METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING RUSSIAN GRAMMAR TO ENGLISH SPEAKING BEGINNERS, BASED ON JEROME BRUNER'S SPIRAL CURRICULUM: INTEGRATION OF GRAMMAR AND SPEAKING PRACTICE

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Abstract

The teaching of grammar, with its focus on forms, has remained central in traditional Foreign Language syllabi, despite the popularity of Communicative Language Teaching that advocates focus on meaning. A distinctive move towards integration between the two approaches has instigated an on-going debate about the role of explicit and implicit elements in language teaching.

This paper proposes a possible solution for the integration of explicit grammar teaching with implicit learning during speaking practice. My new spiralling methodology is based on cognitive principles developed by an American psychologist and educationalist Jerome Bruner, also integrating Second Language Acquisition findings. My project develops and tests this methodology in the context of teaching Russian to English speaking beginners, focusing on case acquisition within learners' speech.

Key words: language teaching, inflection, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), spiralling, Russian as a Foreign Language, integration.

The teaching of grammar, after centuries of dominating language pedagogy, fell out of favour with the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that focuses solely on meaning in communication, producing learners with exceptional fluency and, at the same time, with inadequately low linguistic competence [Lightbown & Spada 1990; R. Ellis 2006; among others]. Despite this U-turn in research, grammar has remained central within traditional modular syllabi, where grammar tends to be studied separately from speaking skills [Ur 2011] and learners often struggle to "internalize" [R. Ellis 2006: 84] grammar

knowledge in their speech. Thus, "the tension between the desirability of communicative use of the FL (*foreign language*), on the one hand, and the felt need for a linguistic focus in language learning, on the other" [Long 1991: 41] still remains topical.

In this paper I am proposing a way of integrating the teaching of grammar with teaching speaking, which is based on the principles of Spiral Curriculum, put forward by the American educationalist and cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, and has a potential of resolving the above stated tension.

Explicit VS Implicit

The idea of integrating grammar with interaction is not new in itself, and originates from the debate around the role of explicit and implicit knowledge in teaching grammar; the former concisely described as the knowledge of grammar rules, with the latter defined as the utilization of grammatical features in speech. It is commonly agreed that the aim of language teaching is primarily implicit knowledge; the ways of achieving this goal though, are still far from being clear.

In pedagogy, this distinction between the two types of knowledge was originally understood as the choice between explicit teaching, when the rules are explained directly, (e.g., PPP model (presentation-practice-production)); and implicit teaching, which aims to get learners to produce required forms without verbalizing the actual rules (e.g., Task-based Instruction (TBI)). For over two decades, both teachers and researchers used to subscribe to one or the other, while the substantial body of research, testing the effectiveness of each approach, produced mixed results [Ur 2011], providing critique as well as support for either point of view.

After that standoff period, there is now a slow but distinctive move towards integration, with proponents of each approach attempting to assimilate the elements from their opponents' models. On one hand, Long [1991] suggested Focus-on-Form feature within CLT, allowing "brief interruptions" in communication to discuss grammatical aspects encountered [Long 1991: 46; Shintani 2015]. On the other hand, Dekeyser [2007], among other researchers, while promoting grammar practice as an essential element of teaching language skills, put particular emphases on the *meaningfulness* of practice activities.

It appears though, that the suggestions of integration from pedagogy researchers are employing a "Mix and Match" principle, aiming to ""mop up" errors or gaps" in learners' interlanguages [Ur 2011: 518], which does not seem likely to create a solid linguistic and skill base.

In language teaching, R. Ellis proposed a modular syllabus consisting of *separate* task-based and linguistic components, which, though still separating explicit and implicit teaching, made a tentative step towards integrating both into a language curriculum [R. Ellis 2003]. There has also been a suggestion to allocate explicit teaching to initial stages of learning, thus creating the linguistic foundations for later implicit learning [N. Ellis 2005], thereby advocating the incorporation of both elements into language teaching, but without indicating the ways of doing it.

Linear VS Spiralling

What my methodology is proposing, is a well-developed *system of continuous integration* of explicit and implicit elements at every stage of a lesson, through building learners' grammar knowledge simultaneously with developing their speaking skills.

Let us see how learners' knowledge is built within traditional and spiral syllabi. In a traditional grammar syllabus, described as *linear*, each big chunk of language information (say, a case) is isolated from the others and is practiced in a lot of detail, before being left for good [Howatt 1974: 20]. This means that a declension paradigm for each Russian case is introduced once, and English speaking learners would need to memorise, for example, for the Instrumental case, 7 noun endings, often together with 6 adjective endings [Timberlake 2004], and are expected to handle these in their speech at the same time. Then they move to the next case. Thus, knowledge is constructed by stacking huge blocks of paradigms, one after another, in a line (hence, the term "linear").

Spiralling involves introducing simplified ideas and smaller amounts of information first and then *revisiting* the concept several times, adding more new information each time (hence, the spiral analogy) [Bruner, 2009/1960]. In teaching grammar, this means splitting huge chunks of learning material (e.g., declension paradigms) into smaller "portions" (e.g., different case endings) and gradually feeding these "portions" into learners' speech, alternating them with ample speaking practice, thus creating a condition for learners to internalise the inflection. If we develop the above

metaphor, spiralling uses small bricks from different blocks (e.g., from noun declensions and from verb conjugations) to help leaners build sentences, rather than memorise paradigms.

The important part of spiralling is that overtime, paradigms are also constructed by revisiting the same grammar concept (e.g., a particular case) every time a new "portion" (e.g., new case ending) is introduced, thereby building the new knowledge on the basis of the existing knowledge [Bruner 2009/1960], and thus expanding and strengthening the learners' linguistic system.

The balance of explicit and implicit does not imply equal distribution of time between the two types of activities – it is obvious that speaking practice requires considerably more time than grammar explanations. It is more about shifting learners' focus fairly regularly from form to meaning and back. This way, the core grammar syllabus and the communicative syllabus become intertwined, continuously complementing each other without overriding priority given to either.

Research findings behind grammar spiralling

My spiralling methodology employs two revolutionary findings from the research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) – the concept of *noticing* and the *Interaction Hypothesis*. Noticing was originally conceptualized by Schmidt (2001) as a deliberate attention to linguistic form within communicative activities, and has since been empirically supported by further research [e.g., Gurzynski-Weiss & Baralt 2015]. The positive effect of noticing on the learning of linguistic forms within CLT is explained by reinforcing form-meaning mapping [N. Ellis 2005], that is why, within spiralling, attracting learners' attention to a grammar form which is studied, during speaking activities, strengthens the connection between the ending and its use in speech, thus facilitating the internalisation of grammar.

The Interaction Hypothesis, first formulated by Long and then developed by other researchers [Loewen & Sato 2018, for a review], attaches the prime significance to cognitive aspects of comprehension and production of language, with a few studies demonstrating a positive effect of interaction on grammar [e.g., Brown 2016].

Testing my spiralling methodology on pronunciation teaching in 2016-2017 at the University of Sheffield, yielded results which considerably exceeded my predictions - the

experimental group taught my integrated spiralling course for only 8 hours, significantly outscored the Russian Studies group taught using traditional linear approach for about 50 hours, on most of the aspects [Parker forthcoming]. In my current project, I am developing the application of my methodology to teaching Russian case morphology and will be testing the inflection acquisition in oral production, using various factors, affecting the process as variables.

Conclusion

Having discussed the possibilities of integrating grammar teaching with interaction put forward by a number of researchers, and having developed their findings, I am proposing a new methodology of continuous integration of explicit grammar teaching with implicit learning during speaking activities. Based on Spiral Curriculum principles, it is presented as a possible alternative to traditional linear teaching.

This methodology has a potential to make teaching Russian in the Anglo-American context much more effective, thus promoting Russian outside Russia. Moreover, it is seminal to research into teaching other morphologically rich grammars.

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