



Content (Linguistic) Knowledge in Language Learning in High School

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Abstract

The present paper intends to show that it is reasonable to include certain part of modern knowledge about language (linguistic knowledge) in language learning in high school, to offer instruments of presenting them, and to outline the spectrum of their effectiveness. Communication and cognition are considered as two mutually complementing and reinforcing fragments of developing holistic speech competence among students and including content (linguistic) knowledge in language learning as a means to develop mental skills. The present paper proposes to include some concepts of modern linguistics in the process of language learning in order to develop coherent communication—first and foremost, writing—skills among students: the structural pattern of the sentence, the argument structure of the sentence, syntactic valence, semantic case, etc.

Keywords: cognition, integrated curricula, language learning, content knowledge, functional grammar.

Over the last half-century the communicative principle has become the main principle of language learning (LL). First and foremost, this applies to learning nonnative languages, which are normally called foreign languages (FLL). Expanding the limits of interpersonal and intercultural communication while learning those languages has become—without doubt—a motivational priority. As a result, involvement of a substantial linguistic component as such in FLL has been sidelined, to say the least. Furthermore, that expansion of the “repertoire” of languages boils down to learning more-and-more limited number of languages-intermediaries, and that the number of those languages is in danger of eventually accounting to one. For the time being, English seems to be the irreplaceable “guarantor of communication.” Let us put aside political and geopolitical aspects of that trend toward language uniformity, especially given the fact that politically, the language policy of the European Union, in particular, leans toward language diversity—“importance of language competences and language diversity in the changing international environment”. [1] In this paper, I will show that it is reasonable to include knowledge about language (linguistic knowledge) in language learning in high school. I posit that part of that knowledge should be included in the curriculum, showing the instruments of presenting them and the spectrum of their effectiveness. That may weaken as it were the principle of communicativeness but only insofar as its aspirations toward absolute dominance in LL or even FLL are concerned—in a nutshell, it is about two mutually complementing and reinforcing fragments of developing holistic speech competence among students—communicative and cognitive.

LL in high school is part of the curriculum, an academic discipline, and as such it must have the goal of developing not just competences in individual disciplines, but also overall competences of a person, developing cognitive competences of the highest degree in particular—skills of analyzing and evaluating text statements (cognitive skills together with passive forms of speech, such as reading and listening) and skills of constructing a substantiated oral or written text (cognitive skills together with active forms of speech, such as writing and speaking). It is obvious that the teaching potential of such a discipline is much bigger than serving communicative needs, and the expansion occurs thanks to involving a large spectrum of cognitive skills in the teaching goals and results. In the context of educational objectives of the 21st century, when not only is communication perceived differently, but also objectives are modified while drawing up the curriculum, its full use is at the very core of the educational agenda. Thus, I think it is of utmost importance to turn to the communication dimension and its sub-dimensions. The first sub-dimension is effective communication, which includes not just using the correct language, but also having an impressive set of emotional and cognitive skills necessary to analyze the information/text and “to achieve an effective communication.” [2] It is complemented by the CDC-model requirements for the curriculum “that sets out the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding.” [3]

None of the natural or artificial systems can imitate human thinking, his logical and cognitive categories as completely and coherently as language can. Those categories exist in the grammar of the language and



its linguistic description. Does it mean that we have to return to boning up on grammar “school style,” the roots of which reach back virtually to antiquity and which is conserved in many ways up until now in native language learning? No, because, *inter alia*, this kind of linguistic/grammatical approach contradicts the communicative principle: that very contradiction was the reason why it was rejected by modern FLL.

The new “coming” of linguistics in high school should be at the converging point of modern linguistic approaches (linguistics as a cognitive science) and goals of modern education—to develop skills necessary for a 21st-century man. However, before moving on to the practical proposals regarding these two scientific paradigms—linguistic and educational—I deem it appropriate to briefly focus on terms *content (linguistic) knowledge* and *language learning*, which are mentioned in the title of this paper.

The notion of content knowledge derives from the amalgam “pedagogical content knowledge” (PCK), which was introduced to the active pedagogical discourse by Lee S. Shulman and was supposed “to merge” subject matter with pedagogical competences. [4] Later on, technological knowledge was added to this educational paradigm to suit the educational paradigm of the 21st century, and the new three-layer amalgam PTCK [5] was comprised of two double-layer sub-amalgams pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and technological content knowledge (TCK). However, here too “PCK covers the core business of teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy.” [6] In other words, (P)CK is the knowledge that the future language teacher must obtain during his professional training at the university as results of his theoretical courses on applied and general linguistics. It is the linguistic education that he will have to apply to his students’ language learning. Consequently, one should clearly differentiate between language learning and linguistic education, “which, by the way, is reflected in having special educational plans for the Linguistics specialty. Is it justified? I believe yes, because such specialties make it possible to plan and fulfill practical tasks, along with planning the very theoretical issues of linguistics.” [7] For successful practice, the teacher will certainly need the other two components of the above-mentioned amalgam as well and, in addition to that, competences in ESD (Education for Sustainable Development): systems thinking, values and ethics, emotions, actions [8]. Thus, another important problem arises—to change professional training programs for future language teachers, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The above-mentioned conceptual approach underlies the integrated language course of the Russian language whose linguistic component itself was combined with improving all 4 forms of speech on the one hand, and developing cognitive competences on the other. We have chosen coherent communication—first and foremost, writing—as the area of application for integrative learning potential of language teaching, i.e., complex development of communication skills. It should be added that Ayb High School students’ first (native) language is Armenian, but they also have English proficiency at the level not lower than B2 according to CEFR and Russian proficiency—at least, those groups that study according to the approved program—at the level close to TRFL2 (equal to B2 in CEFR), sometimes even higher.

Having writing skills and their application is not only one of the requirements of CEFR, but also a complex requirement of the educational curriculum as such, in other words, it spreads “across the board.” [9] In this regard, on the one hand, it in a way belittles the significance of disciplines, directly linked to gaining communication skills (literature, languages, analytical writing, etc.), as they share the “responsibility” for developing speech competences with other subjects that do not directly aim at that. On the other, aiming to fulfill this task, which is one of the most important, penetrating tasks, learning first (native) language and nonnative (foreign) languages come under the same “umbrella.” I hope—referring, first and foremost, to teaching the Russian language—that some insights of comparative nature and recommendations of methodological nature will be useful in teaching other languages as well.

The course of the Russian language at Ayb is based on functional grammar, which, given its potential to activate communication, is often called communicative and/or active too. [10] Its use in Russian academic handbooks and, accordingly, in teaching languages has a 20-year history. Nonetheless, there are two very substantial “buts” here. First, those handbooks are almost exceptionally for teaching Russian as a foreign language (TRFL) and, what is more, at the level not higher than TRFL2 or for teaching the language-for-specific-purposes (LSP). Second, those handbooks are intended for developing grammar skills and, despite being founded on syntax, they use morphological commentaries characteristic of traditional linear grammar. In the handbooks for developing reading and writing skills, the functional-grammatical approach is basically not used, and they—those skills—as mentioned above, are the very focus of our attention. To be more precise, we tried not just to show the means of expressing subject-predicate, modificative, and agent-object relationships/meanings in the Russian language, but also “to include” the comprehension of that whole toolkit in the process of comprehending written text (reading)



and to employ that toolkit in producing coherent communication—first and foremost, writing. It is obvious that one should take into account the Ayb students’ “language repertoire” and the configuration of languages that they are proficient in and use both the positive and the negative interlanguage transfer of speech knowledge and skills, the so-called interlanguage interference. Referring to that very circumstance, below I will focus on 3 concrete subjects that linguistic knowledge, traditionally left out of the school program, helped students apprehend:

- I. Culture-specific problems related to perceiving different situations imposed as it were from the outside and using personal pronouns, especially the pronoun “I” [11] as the subject of a sentence in the Russian language have led to the domination of sentences with a semantic/indirect subject. The grammatical core of such constructions in the Russian language is simple sentences with the subject in the dative case and, accordingly, without coordination between the subject and the predicate. This specificity of the Russian syntax is not present in either English or Armenian syntax. What is more, those constructions when used by an Armenian speaker are construed as influenced by the Russian language. In order to ensure adequate comprehension of those constructions and to stimulate their correct usage in speech, it is more appropriate to structure those sentences in the Russian language with the following formula $S_{N/PronDat} + Pred_{V_{fin,pres/fut_3sing}}$ or $Pred_{V_{fin,past, neutr}}$. A natural question arises whether this schematic representation is more preferable than the traditional descriptive definition. From my perspective, it has at least two undeniable advantages: 1) thinking that formula over helps students digest it; 2) being in a sense a mind map, it organizes their thinking.
- II. Another concept of modern linguistics that is worth including in the school knowledge is the theory of a sentence’s argument structure and its syntactic valence introduced by Lucien Tesnière with the addition of Charles J. Fillmore’s semantic classification of cases. In the context of our course in particular, it helps better understand how the means of expressing syntactic relations—commonly called agent-object relations—are represented. By the way, in this case as opposed to the above-mentioned, it is not just more plausible, but more reasonable to teach in comparison, even considering the internal specificities of particular grammatical representation of verb-phrase syntagms in other languages (for example, exceptionally prepositional heads in the English). The educational advantage of this approach is that it lets you overcome controversies and certain limitations of the traditional syntactic description, to bring the study of these semantic relations into correspondence with the logic of thinking, to take language learning to a level of interlanguage comparison and to cultivate mental skills of a higher degree—skills of analysis and generalization—in students.
- III. In terms of directly affecting the ability to improve writing skills, the ideas of transformational grammar cannot be overestimated. In general, they are in the very foundation of functional grammar, which brings together means of expressing concrete meanings and outlines the consistencies of their interchangeableness. However, the application of this idea in language learning should not be confined to its use in practice. It should be apprehended by students at the semiotic level as a universal trait of a linguistic sign, as its ability of syntagmatic variation. This is the very thing that will make their writing not just more diverse, but more clear, precise, and, more importantly, argumentative as well.

The above list of examples, which can be extended, shows once again that no one is talking about opposing the communicative and cognitive principles in language learning. The main idea here is to expand cognitive abilities of language learning, which persistently demands employing additional content (linguistic) knowledge in the educational process.

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