

GRAMMAR ACQUISITION IN ROMANIAN AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT. *Grammar acquisition in Romanian as foreign language.* Learning Romanian as a foreign language includes acquiring the grammar of the language. Teaching the grammar must have regard to all language particularities like gender, plurals, topics and syntax. Translating from Romanian in a language that all students know is not a highly recommended method because every language has it's own way of creating the sentences and this translating process may cause difficulties in the teaching process. This may occur because the students are focused on understanding in L1, then sending it in their mother tongue, and finally the student tries to understand the phenomenon in Romanian language. One of recommended methods is the structural exercises, like imitation and substitution, so the students do not get confused after presenting all the rules. There are also the Deductive approach, the case when the teacher gives the rules and the students have time to become familiar to them, and the Inductive approach, which allows the students to form themselves the rules after they are given the examples. The Deductive approach is recommended in case of irregular patterns and the Inductive approach in case of regular patterns, because is based on analogy. Teaching a grammatical concept should be done by offering examples using relatively simple vocabulary so their attention won't be directed on understanding the vocabulary, but on understanding the new grammatical concept.

Key words: *grammar acquisition, teaching process, structural exercises, imitation, substitution, deductive approach, inductive approach, foreign language.*

REZUMAT. *Achiziția gramaticii în limba română ca limbă străină.* Învățarea românei ca limbă străină presupune și achiziția gramaticii. Predarea gramaticii trebuie să aibă în vedere toate particularitățile lingvistice, cum ar fi genul, plural, substantivul și sintaxa. Traducerea din limba română într-o limbă pe care toți elevii o cunosc nu este o metodă foarte recomandată, deoarece fiecare limbă are propriul mod de a crea propozițiile și acest proces de traducere poate provoca dificultăți în procesul de predare. Acest lucru se poate întâmpla, deoarece elevii se concentrează pe înțelegerea în L1, apoi traduc mesajul în limba maternă, iar în final studentul încearcă să înțeleagă fenomenul în limba română. Una dintre metodele recomandate este exercițiile structurale, cum ar fi imitația și substituția, astfel încât elevii să înțeleagă conceptul gramatical după prezentarea tuturor

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regulilor. Există, de asemenea, metoda deductivă în care profesorul oferă regulile și studenții au timp să se familiarizeze cu acestea și metoda inductivă, prin care se oferă exemple, ajungând apoi la regulă. Metoda deductivă este recomandată în cazul structuri neregulate, în timp ce metoda inductivă este recomandată pentru structurile regulate, deoarece se bazează pe analogie. Predarea unui concept gramatical ar trebui făcută prin oferirea de exemple folosind un vocabular relativ simplu, astfel încât atenția studenților să nu fie îndreptată spre înțelegerea vocabularului, ci spre înțelegerea noului concept gramatical.

***Cuvinte-cheie:** achiziția gramaticii, procesul de predare, exerciții structurale, imitație, substituție, metoda deductivă, metoda inductivă, limbă străină.*

In this article we will try to present some approaches in grammar acquisition. Because the grammar is one of the most important part of language acquisition, we need to have all the instruments that we need in teaching and acquiring it. We will start our article with defining the grammar competence, we will continue by presenting it according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages. The next part of the article will be dedicated to two different approaches in teaching, the Deductive approach and the Inductive approach, both of them being equally important. The third part of the article will concern the different types of exercises that we can use to practice the grammar in order to acquire it. The main purpose of this paper is to present different parts that we have the process of grammar acquisition, such as teaching, acquisition and practicing.

1. Definition

Language acquisition is a continuous process and we have to start thinking in that language. If we don't start thinking in the new language, all our efforts may be in vain, acquiring a foreign language does not mean we have to forget everything we learned in other languages, but it means that we are not allowed to use the old knowledges. This means that we are not allowed to make any correlations with the native language we speak, or with other language, it means that the only correlations we should make are with the knowledges that we acquired previously. This process does not happen at the early stages of learning, but, in time, it is recommended to stop using the native language and to use only the language we want to acquire.

Language acquisition is a dynamic and subconscious process, similar to the way children acquire their native language. "The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. We are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired. Instead, we have a "feel" for

correctness. Grammatical sentences "sound" right, or "feel" right, and errors feel wrong, even if we do not consciously know what rule was violated." (Krashen, 1982: 2) This means that we learn a new language by practicing it, and not by memorizing some rules we find in the grammar books.

2. The Framework

The grammar is one of the most important parts in teaching/learning a new language, because it is based on producing and understanding sentences, without memorizing them, in order to communicate with others. "Formally, the grammar of a language may be seen as the set of principles governing the assembly of elements into meaningful labelled and bracketed strings (sentences). Grammatical competence is the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognising well-formed phrases and sentences in accordance with these principles (as opposed to memorising and reproducing them as fixed formulae). The grammar of any language in this sense is highly complex and so far defies definitive or exhaustive treatment. There are a number of competing theories and models for the organisation of words into sentences. It is not the function of the Framework to judge between them or to advocate the use of any one, but rather to encourage users to state which they have chosen to follow and what consequences their choice has for their practice. Here we limit ourselves to identifying some parameters and categories which have been widely used in grammatical description" (CEFR: 112-113).

The grammatical aspect of the language is a complex system and, when we teach the grammar, we must have in consideration some aspects of Romanian language such as:

- the genders – masculine, feminine and neutral;
- the plurals - considering the special cases when some morphemes change, like *brad>brazi, fată>fete*;
- the verbs – with some morphemes that change here also: *deschid – deschizi, merge – să meargă*;
- the topics.

Grammar acquisition is made gradually, in conformation with the language levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. These levels are described by Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which gives us an important perspective of what elements to acquire in our process:

- Level A1: is considered the lowest level of generative language use the point at which the learner can interact in a simple way, ask and answer simple questions about themselves, where they live, people they know, and things they have, initiate and respond to simple statements in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics, rather than relying purely

on a very finite rehearsed, lexically organized repertoire of situation-specific phrases;

- Level A2: at this level that the majority of descriptors stating social functions are to be found, like use simple everyday polite forms of greeting and address; greet people, ask how they are and react to news; handle very short social exchanges; ask and answer questions about what they do at work and in free time; make and respond to invitations; discuss what to do, where to go and make arrangements to meet; make and accept offers;
- Level B1 (independent speaker): ability to maintain interaction and get across what you want to, in a range of contexts, for example: generally follow the main points of extended discussion around him/her, provided speech is clearly articulated in standard dialect; give or seek personal views and opinions in an informal discussion with friends; express the main point he/she wants to make comprehensibly; exploit a wide range of simple language flexibly to express much of what he or she wants to; maintain a conversation or discussion but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what he/she would like to; keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production. The second feature is the ability to cope flexibly with problems in everyday life, for example cope with less routine situations on public transport; deal with most situations likely to arise when making travel arrangements through an agent or when actually traveling; enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics; make a complaint; take some initiatives in an interview/consultation (e.g. to bring up a new subject) but is very dependent on interviewer in the interaction; ask someone to clarify or elaborate what they have just said;
- Level B2: the speaker is able to focus on effective argument: account for and sustain his opinions in discussion by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments; explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options; construct a chain of reasoned argument; develop an argument giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view; explain a problem and make it clear that his/her counterpart in a negotiation must make a concession; speculate about causes, consequences, hypothetical situations; take an active part in informal discussion in familiar contexts, commenting, putting point of view clearly, evaluating alternative proposals and making and responding to hypotheses. Secondly, running right through the level there are two new focuses. The first is being able to more than hold your own in social discourse: e.g. converse naturally, fluently and effectively; understand in detail what is said to him/her in the standard spoken

language even in a noisy environment; initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when he/she needs to, though he/she may not always do this elegantly; use stock phrases (e.g. 'That's a difficult question to answer') to gain time and keep the turn whilst formulating what to say; interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party; adjust to the changes of direction, style and emphasis normally found in conversation; sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker. The second new focus is a new degree of language awareness: correct mistakes if they have led to misunderstandings; make a note of 'favorite mistakes' and consciously monitor speech for it/them; generally correct slips and errors if he/she becomes conscious of them; plan what is to be said and the means to say it, considering the effect on the recipient.

- Level C1: What seems to characterize this level is good access to a broad range of language, which allows fluent, spontaneous communication, as illustrated by the following examples: Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions. There is little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance strategies; only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language;
- Level C2: degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with the language which typifies the speech of those who have been highly successful learners. Descriptors calibrated here include: convey finer shades of meaning precisely by using, with reasonable accuracy, a wide range of modification devices; has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative level of meaning; backtrack and restructure around a difficulty so smoothly the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.

Taking in consideration the description that CEFR gives us, we need to set grammatical items for each one of these levels. We need to teach the grammar gradually, in order to help our students acquire it more easily. Therefore, the *Descrierea minimală a limbii române* comes with a division of grammar for a proper fitting to the framework presented. For level A1 some of the components we teach are the nouns, the articles, the adjectives, the pronouns, the verbs (present tense, future and past), simple prepositions, adverbs and numbers. For Level A2, we add the genitive and the dative form for nouns, articles and pronouns. Concerning the adjectives, the students learn how to make comparisons regarding the qualities of objects/persons. Also they learn the reflexives verbs, another

type of future tense, and how to express the cause, the concession and the purpose using the prepositions.

In level B1 the students learn the vocative, they learn new forms of using comparisons in case of adjectives, they learn the forms of dative reflexive pronouns. In the chapter dedicated to the verb, we add a new past tens form, which is specific to Romanian language. Also, the students learn new conjunctions and preposition to express the place, the time, such as *oricând, oriunde, de pe, în afară de* ('anytime', 'anywhere', 'from the', 'excepting'). Level B2 is closer to the native speaker and introduces more difficult ways in using the nouns, articles that express possessions, interrogative pronouns. Concerning the verbs, this level brings another form of past tense and new prepositions and conjunctions, like *fără să, până să* ('without', 'until').

The grammar competence is evaluated in conformation with the scale offered by Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

C2	Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).
C1	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot.
B2	Good grammatical control; occasional 'slips' or non-systematic errors and minor flaws in sentence structure may still occur, but they are rare and can often be corrected in retrospect. Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding.
B1	Communicates with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts; generally good control though with noticeable mother tongue influence. Errors occur, but it is clear what he/she is trying to express. Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used 'routines' and patterns associated with more predictable situations.
A2	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes – for example tends to mix up tenses and forget to mark agreement; nevertheless, it is usually clear what he/she is trying to say.
A1	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire.

This scale is very useful in evaluating the student and also in teaching, because we must teach grammar gradually, according to each one of these levels.

3. Approaches in teaching grammar

There are two ways of teaching grammar: the Deductive method and the Inductive method. The Inductive method consists on generalizations about the grammatical rules after seeing and practicing examples in class. This method allows students to make their own assumptions and to form their own mechanisms of

learning and understanding the grammatical system of the new language. In this case, acquisition can occur quickly because the students are more aware of the system and they focus on the grammatical use. This approach is more suitable for regular patterns, because it is based on analogies. It involves students participating actively in their own instruction. In addition, the approach encourages a learner to develop her/his own mental set of strategies for dealing with tasks. In other words, this approach attempts to highlight grammatical rules implicitly in which the learners are encouraged to conclude the rules given by the teacher. (Widodo, 2006)

There are some advantages and disadvantages to this approach and I think it's relevant to take them in consideration in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. One of the advantages is that students are trained to be familiar with the rule discovery; this could enhance learning autonomy and self-reliance and they are not simply participants to the lessons, they are forced to be directly involved in recognizing the pattern and applying them. This approach is based on exercises, because only after practice the students can recognize all the patterns, it's not enough to give two or three examples. A disadvantage is that some students need to see the rules before applying them.

Illustration:

Step 1 – examples: *Îl văd pe coleg.* (m) (I see the colleague - masculine)

O văd pe colegă. (f) (I see the colleague - feminine)

Îi văd pe colegi. (m) (I see the colleagues - masculine)

Le văd pe colege. (f) (I see the colleagues - feminine)

Step 2 – exercising: *Îl întâlnește pe băiat* (he meets the boy)

o vede pe fată (he sees the girl)

îi sună pe băieți (he calls the boys)

le anunță pe fete (he tells the girls)

Step 3 – the rule: pronume + verb + pe + substantiv (pronoun + verb + pe 'preposition' + noun)

The second approach, the Deductive method, consists on learning the new concept after being presented the rules. In this case, the students see the rules and, after that, they practice them. This approach is more suitable for irregular patterns, because the students need to see the special cases before trying to use them. This approach is not as fast as the Inductive approach, because the students memorize the rules before practicing them, the acquisition does not occur as quickly as in the case of using the Deductive one. A deductive approach works from the general to the specific. In this case, rules, principles, concepts, or theories are presented first, and then their applications are treated. When we use deduction, we reason from general to specific principles. The deductive approach maintains that a teacher teaches grammar by presenting grammatical rules, and then examples of

sentences are presented. Once students understand rules, they are told to apply the rules given to different examples of sentences. (Widodo, 2006)

There some advantages and disadvantages for this approach, as H. Widodo remarks them in his article. Some advantages consist on the fact that this approach goes straightforwardly to the point and it can be time-saving, because once the student has the rules he can easily apply them on every case. For Romanian language this approach can create problems, because of the irregular patterns, such as the plurals: *fată-fete, sală-săli* (*girl-girls, room-rooms*). An advantage for Romanian language can be the fact that the examples are given right after the teacher explains all the rules, and also the fact that it helps the students who have an analytical style of learning. A major disadvantage for this approach consists in the fact that the students may be driven to the impression that the language is a simple set of rules they can memorize and use them in speaking. The reality is completely different because all of those cases in which we have a lot of irregular patterns.

Illustration:

Step 1 – the rule: pronume + verb + substantiv singular + *lui* (m.) (pronoun + verb + noun + dative case marking)

ei (f.) substantiv plural + *lor* (m.+f.)

Step 2 – examples: Prezent (Present tense)

Îi spun colegului. (I tell the colleague – masculine singular)

Îi spun colegei. (I tell the colleague – feminine singular)

Le spun colegilor. (I tell the colleague – masculine plural)

Le spun colegelor. (I tell the colleague – feminine plural)

Step 3 - exercise: Pune cuvintele din paranteze la forma corectă:

îmi place răspunsul (copil) _____

I-am răspuns (fată). _____

Casa (prieten) meu este mare. _____

Eu le-am ales (prietene) _____mele aceste cărți.

A major difference between the two approaches is that in the case of Inductive approach, students focus on using the correct form, and not on the meaning of the message they are producing. On the other hand, the Deductive approach is more focused on the message than it is on the rules, because the students already learned the rules and the patterns. The deductive approach is related to the conscious learning process in which this approach tries to place a great emphasis on error correction and the presentation of explicit rules (Krashen, 2002). Such an approach is applied for the reason that it is an efficient and elegant way to organize and present the rule that is already understood. The deductive approach is often used with adult learners. The inductive approach relates to subconscious learning processes similar to the

concept of language acquisition. According to this approach, learners learn the system of language (Widodo, 2006).

For teaching Romanian as foreign language, the linguist Eugen Coşeriu comes with some strategies meant to help both the student and the teacher. These strategies are more suitable for teaching the grammar than are for other competences:

- mark out the phenomenon that must be taught – the students must be aware of what they are learning and their attention has to be set on the new grammatical concept. The new forms need to be integrated in some structures that the students already know, so they can focus on what they are supposed to learn, and not understanding the message of the sentence;
- presenting the reasons why they learn the new phenomenon – the students must be aware of the importance of learning the new grammatical concept, because they need to know in which circumstances they can use it;
- the teacher has to determinate how she presents the new concept;
- the teacher has to determinate what methods uses in teaching – every method has it's downsides and it need to be adapted to each classroom's needs (Coşeriu 1989: 34).

According to Coşeriu, what we teach must be in correlation with something they know, so they can learn it easier. If it is something completely new, it is harder for them to acquire it. In his opinion, in teaching the teacher has to use the student's native language or other language that they both know. Using this method of teaching, in Coşeriu's opinion, it is easier for the student to acquire the new language, because he can make correlations easier with something that he knows in other languages he speaks. In my opinion, this method not completely appropriate, because the student is focused on decoding and translating the message from English to his native language, in case he has other native language than English. Then he has to understand the pattern and then he has to make another effort to translate from his native language to English and then to Romanian. This process is too complicated and it distracts the student form the focus of the class, which is understanding the grammatical pattern. To avoid these situations, the teacher has to give easier examples to demonstrate the pattern, has to use words that all the students know in order to make easier the acquisition. For practicing the patterns, the teacher can introduce some more difficult words, but he has to be sure that those words don't increase the difficulty of the acquisition.

4. Types of exercises

There more types of exercises that teachers can use in teaching grammar. These exercises are meant for the students to acquire and to fix the new rules they learn. The types can be used in teaching native languages grammar, but also a foreign language, as Romanian.

1. Structural exercises. When we choose to use these exercises, we must exercise only an item, the difficulty must increase gradually and the number of items shouldn't be more than five. The words we use in the exercise must be known so they don't increase the difficulty of the exercise.

Classification (Platon, Burlacu, Sonea 2011: 94-95):

- reproduction exercises: they have the role to familiarize the student in using a precise structure. Their disadvantage is that the student may get bored, because they consist in repeating the same structure until the structure is acquired. The advantage of the exercise is that the students can acquire correctly and supervised the structure.
- replacement exercises:
 1. simple - the students have to replace a word with another one having the same structure: *Am o rochie roșie/neagră/frumoasă* ('I have a red/black/beautiful dress');
 2. expansion - which have the role to enlarge the structure by adding new elements: *Eu am cumpărat o carte + această*

Eu am cumpărat această carte + interesantă ('I bought this book + interesting)

Eu am cumpărat această carte interesantă.

3. correlation: *Eu mănânc.* ('I eat')

Noi mâncăm. ('We eat')

4. three sided - consists in replacement of more elements in the sentence:

Cumpăr o rochie roșie.+ această

Cumpăr această rochie roșie + lungă

Cumpăr această rochie lungă.

- Structural transformation exercises consist on changing the grammatical structure:

Eu merg la școală. ('I am going to school')

Eu am mers la școală. ('I went to school')

- Structural combining exercises consist on matching two sets of sentences or two parts of a sentence in order to create one:

A mâncat nu numai merele încât era obosit.

A citit atât de mult ci și perele.

- Structural binding exercises consist on combining all other types of exercises:

Ai scris tema? Da, am scris tema./Nu, nu am scris tema. ('Did you write the homework? Yes, I wrote the homework/No, I didn't write the homework').

Other types of exercises are the classical exercises. These exercises are meant to practice and use the grammatical forms that students studied. They have the following characteristics (Platon, Burlacu, Sonea 2011: 95):

- don't follow a pattern;
- what students have to do is well said in the item;
- it is used a meta-linguistic language in creating the items;
- a sentence has only one difficulty;
- they can be done only in writing.

Example: *Puneți verbele din paranteze la forma corectă:* ('Put the verbs in the brackets in the correct form')

El (a merge) la școală. 'He (to go) to school.'

Noi (a mânca) ciocolată. 'We (to eat) chocolate.'

- This type of exercises can be divided in three categories:
 1. memorizing the forms – the students are asked to put the word in the brackets in a specific form;
 2. transformation exercises – this exercises uses a specific terminology, this being the difference from the structural exercise.
- Functional exercises are based on the context, they can propose more than one solution. In this case, we can solve them in two ways:
 1. vertically: *În geantă (a avea) două (caiet). 'In the bag (to have) two (notebook)'*
 2. horizontally: each part of the exercise is directed to different demand:

Puneți cuvintele din paranteză la forma corectă:

Rochia (galben) e a Mariei. 'The (yellow) dress is Maria's.'

Mâine (a călători) la Brașov. 'Tomorrow (to travel) to Brașov.'

Eu (a citi) o carte. 'I (to read) a book.'

Besides these types of exercises, the grammar can be practiced by speaking. This method can help the students to contextualize the grammar, to use it in conversation, because grammar is not limited to a set of rules they can memorize. One type of activity can be based on describing images. The students can receive a set of images and they have to say what the persons in the images are doing. This activity is perfect for practicing the verbs. We can use images also for describing persons when the students are acquiring the nouns or the adjectives.

Another activity can be made of dialogues. The class should be divided in pairs and each pair should represent a typical daily situation, like going to the grocery shop. In this activity, the students can practice more than one grammatical aspect. They have to use correctly the verbs, the plurals and adjectives.

Creating more than one activity in each lesson will help the students to pay more attention, to be more focused on the lesson, and not get bored. It is important for them to participate actively to each activity in order to acquire the grammar.

Conclusions

The grammar is a very important part of learning a foreign language, because the incorrect use of grammar may lead to difficulties in communication with others. In order to correctly acquire the grammar, we need to pay attention to a set of rules and to practice them by combing the exercises. Also, the approach the teacher uses is very important, because each classroom is different and it is important for the teacher to respond to his class's needs. For example, if we have a class in which the majority of students are more independent, the Inductive approach is more suitable for them. But, on the other hand, if our students need more guidance, it would be better if we use the Deductive approach and give them the rules so they can be more sure in using them.

Another important part is choosing the types of exercises that we use. In this case, it would be recommended to use more types of exercises and to bind them with short conversational situations. No matter what method we choose to use, it is important to give our students all the instruments they need to help them in the process of grammar acquisition.

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