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Skills and Knowledge about Language in the Czech Context

Introduction

The topic of the place of grammar¹ in L1 education has been discussed for as far as the history of L1 didactics reaches. Teachers, curriculum designers, politicians, journalists and even general public have been asking how much knowledge about language native speakers need; how much grammar should be taught, what exactly should be taught; some have even been asking if grammar teaching is necessary at all². And if we agree that grammar should be taught, then how does knowledge of grammar align with the development of communication skills? What kind of knowledge about functioning of the language do our pupils need?

L1 teaching at primary and secondary schools is not about educating future linguists but all language users; the topic of how knowledge about language improves the pupils' communication skills is therefore a highly relevant one.

Terminology

To begin with, it is necessary to define what we mean by the basic terminology.

We prefer the term *knowledge about language* to *grammar*; not only it implies a broader sense of understanding language (after all grammar encompasses only morphology and syntax, but language is also phonetics, pragmatics, stylistics, semantics, lexicology, etc.), but as Myhill³ notes, it also implies “a more liberal, learner-centred perspective” and “tends to carry positive associations, perhaps implying insider-knowledge, a professional view of what is valuable and important to children learning to be literate”. On the other hand, *grammar* is a narrower term

¹ For clarification of the terminology see further.

² E.g. the nation-wide debate in the Czech Republic in 2012 started by the articles in the daily *MF Dnes* of March 16th 2012 *Zrušme větný rozbor, žádají učitelé češtiny* [Let's abolish parsing, teachers of Czech are demanding] and *Školáci neumějí česky. Mohou za to hodiny češtiny?* [Pupils don't know Czech. Are Czech lessons to blame?]; for details on the whole debate see S. Štěpáník i M. Šmejkalová, *Průvodce začínajícího češtináře*, Praha 2017, s. 24 n.

³ D. Myhill, *Ways of knowing: Writing with grammar in mind*, English Teaching: Practice and Critique 2005, nr 3, s. 78.

and might take rather negative connotations of prescription, “often implying an outsider view of English (here as L1 – note S. Š.) teaching, and carrying associations of control and blame” (ibid.).

By the title of this paper we have taken a clear position, but throughout the paper we use the term *grammar* rather than *knowledge about language* – this is not a sign of schizophrenia but of the position where the Czech language teaching is currently standing. Under *grammar* we therefore understand traditional language teaching still focusing mainly on language analysis, using parsing as the basic method and taking formal grammar as the fundament of the overall conception of the subject. It is often coupled with notions of error, accuracy and correctness (ibid.). Not to be understood wrong – this does not mean that Czech language teaching would not include communication, composition and style – of course it does, but rather as a separate part that does not really connect with teaching grammar, or, all in all, knowledge about language.

Traditions of Czech language teaching⁴

The beginnings of teaching Czech as L1 reach to the Middle Ages⁵. In this study, however, we would like to focus on modern traditions of teaching Czech, which come at the time of the National Revival, i.e. in the 18th century. Not only it is the time when Czech language spread throughout the different stages of education as the language of instruction and also became a school subject (in both cases including universities), but also when foundations of the education conception whose residues remain until today were laid. In this respect, the teaching of Karl Ferdinand Becker (1775–1849) had a very strong impact. Becker promoted the logic-grammatical approach to language teaching stressing parsing and grammar analysis⁶. He based his theory on the narrow connection between language and thought and connected grammar categories together with the logic ones. He understood language teaching as a tool for teaching logic, and therefore grammar teaching was supposed to become popular logic (ibid.). Consequently, the conception of Czech language teaching has been based on the analytical-synthetic approach for about two centuries even though reactions to Becker’s theory came in regular periods.

The first of them came with Antonín Janů (1852–1899) who advocated for the so-called a-grammatical movement. Janů rejected all kinds of grammar teaching and

⁴ For more see J. Jelínek, *Nástin dějin vyučování českému jazyku v letech 1774–1918*, Praha 1972; M. Šmejkalová, *Čeština a škola – úryvky skrytých dějin: český jazyk a jeho vyučování na středních školách, 1918–1989*, Praha 2010; or M. Šmejkalová i S. Štěpáník, *Teaching Czech language and literature in the Czech Republic*, [w:] *Teaching of national languages in the V4 countries*, red. M. Pieniżek i S. Štěpáník, Praha 2016, s. 31–63.

⁵ J. Svobodová et al., *Didaktika českého jazyka s komunikačními prvky: Počáteční fáze výuky mateřštiny*, Ostrava 2003.

⁶ J. Jelínek, *Nástin dějin vyučování českému jazyku v letech 1774–1918*, Praha 1972, s. 101–102.

promoted “speaking exercises” (*mluvní cviky*) which are supposed to develop the “sense for speaking” (*mluvní cit*)⁷. Janů’s approach was later rejected as unsystematic.

Czech language teaching has always been intertwined with the development of Czech linguistics, which meant that the theories developed in the 20s and 30s by the Prague Linguistic Circle had impact on the approach to language teaching as well. The result of the team composed of several top Czech linguists (Havránek, Kopecký, Starý, Získal) was the textbook *Cvičebnice jazyka českého pro I.–IV. třídu*, published between 1933 and 1936. The authors adopted an inductive approach to the matter and introduced a conception based on knowledge about language, but at the same time followed the newest educational trends and the psychological aspects of language teaching. Unfortunately, the textbook was not as successful as it would deserve as teachers were simply not prepared for such a huge change.

The period of WWII meant repression and germanization; Czech language was seen as the oldest symbol of Czech statehood and national identity – as a result, the subject was seen as an important tool of ideology and indoctrination – as “an opinion-forming subject”⁸.

The communist coup of 1948 meant a complete change in the whole school system. It brought centralization, ideologization and political education – “Never before – and that also includes the WWII period – and never after was the Czech school system under such pressure of massive ideologization”⁹. The main aim of the school was bringing up the new socialist person, and Czech language was seen as one of the most important tools for doing so. Formal grammar teaching was even more at the forefront after Stalin published his *Essays on Language* in 1950.

At the end of the 50s, Otokar Chlup (1875–1965), a prominent Czech educationalist, started a discussion on Czech language teaching. He saw the criticism that aimed at too much content, bad textbooks, poor methods and too much grammatical theory, which all lead to insufficient pupils’ results. Unfortunately, his attempts to reduce and modernize grammar teaching lead to tensions between pedagogues and linguists, and turned out to be unsuccessful.

The 60s brought slight political liberalization and changes to the whole school system, which was seen as distant from real life. In Czech language teaching wide criticism occurred regarding the organisation of the subject, the content, the methods. What was seen as a necessity was a complete reform of the overall aims of the subject towards practical mastering of the language and recognition of its aesthetic values. Rather than at form morphology, spelling and parsing the educational theory aimed at syntax, communication, composition and style. Unfortunately, the Soviet invasion to Czechoslovakia in August 1968 meant a stop to all these attempts, and as part of “normalization” after 1968 the socialist character of the school system returned. As a result, the 70s meant the return of rigid teaching and formal grammar.

⁷ J. Jelínek, *Nástin dějin vyučování českému jazyku v letech 1774–1918*, Praha 1972, s. 153 n.

⁸ M. Šmejkalová, *Čeština a škola – úryvky skrytých dějin: český jazyk a jeho vyučování na středních školách, 1918–1989*, Praha 2010.

⁹ M. Šmejkalová, *Čeština a škola – úryvky skrytých dějin: český jazyk a jeho vyučování na středních školách, 1918–1989*, Praha 2010, s. 249.

Jan Průcha (*1934) reacted to this at the end of the 70s: “The traditional philological and in the school practice dominating conception of language teaching as the so-called formal discipline (comp. Vygotskij, 1974) floods the pupils with detailed, fragmented and encyclopedic knowledge mostly from the area of grammar theory, and, on the other hand, does not satisfy the important demands of the development of the pupils’ communication abilities and skills, which are so much needed in the life of today’s society; as a result, pupils are not interested in language education, they undermine it and it brings unsatisfactory achievement results”¹⁰. Průcha proposed a subject called “Mother Tongue”, which he understood as “education in the theory and practice of language communication (underlined by Průcha – note S. Š.), which must be in compliance with the real needs of life, work and life-long learning [...]”¹¹. Again his attempts were stopped and Průcha later turned to general education.

Half of the 80s, after the communication-pragmatic turn in linguistics, brought new impulses from the West, esp. focus on communication and composition. Since then theory, i.e. Czech language didactics, has been following this trend¹², but practice, i.e. school teaching, is still to a great extent burdened by the 200-year-old tradition and the post-communist grammar heritage respectively.

Where are we now?

First of all, it is necessary to say that a comprehensive study on the way Czech language is taught at schools is missing. However, from partial studies¹³ we know that in many respects educational practice remains on rigidified positions even though the curriculum reform of 2007 abolished the unified and centralized *syllabi* (osnovy) and introduced the *Framework Education Programme* (Rámcový vzdělávací program; further referred to as *FEP*), which gives schools a great deal of freedom as far as the content, structure and methods of the subject are concerned. The FEP defines the overall educational conception and objectives, the expected outcomes in individual educational areas (Czech language and literature together with foreign languages being one of them) and introduces the cross-curricular subjects and key competencies. On this base individual schools create their own *School Education Programme* (SEP) that specifies the selection of the matter and the manner of its delivery to the pupils.

¹⁰ J. Průcha, *Jazykové vzdělání*, Praha 1978, s. 11.

¹¹ J. Průcha, *Jazykové vzdělání*, Praha 1978, s. 11.

¹² comp. M. Čechová, *Vyučování slohu: Úvod do teorie*, Praha 1985; M. Čechová, *Komunikační a slohová výchova*, Praha 1998; M. Čechová i V. Styblík, *Čeština a její vyučování*, Praha 1998; J. Svobodová, *Jazyková specifika školské komunikace a výuka mateřštiny*, Ostrava 2003; and others.

¹³ e.g. Z. Šalamounová, *Výuková situace: Když spojky nejen spojují aneb Ke komunikačnímu pojetí výuky gramatiky*, „Komenský“ 2013, nr 3, s. 38–44; Z. Šalamounová, *Socializace do školního jazyka*, Brno 2015; S. Štěpáník, *Výuková situace: Transformace větného členu na větu a naopak v kontextu větného rozboru*, „Komenský“ 2016, nr 3, s. 30–39; K. Zajícová, *Komparace vyučování českého jazyka na tradiční a alternativní střední škole*. Diploma thesis, Praha 2016.

Unfortunately, due to many reasons the reform has not delivered the expected outcomes¹⁴, and so our subject has mainly remained on the same positions where it was before. This means that its content is still greatly derived from the theory of grammar (with only a few exceptions) and even though the curriculum officially declares the communication aim to be the most important one, traditional methods like language analysis and parsing still prevail – despite the fact that many studies (not only in the Czech Republic but in a wide international context) show that traditional grammar teaching does not improve the pupils' communication skills: "There is no evidence base to support this assertion that learning progresses chronologically from learning a grammatical concept to being able to apply it"¹⁵.

Some of the problems this leads to can be summarized in the following points:

- Language knowledge and stylistic / communication skills of Czech upper-secondary-school leavers are insufficient¹⁶, pupils in general have basic problems with expressing themselves¹⁷.
- The PISA results show that reading literacy of Czech pupils at the lower-secondary level have the tendency to fall under the average¹⁸.
- Czech language is one of the least popular subjects at lower-secondary school, which is a long-lasting phenomenon¹⁹.
- Traditional grammar teaching seems not to have any beneficial impact on pupils' productive skills²⁰.

What grammar / knowledge about language teaching do we need?

The ultimate goal for any language teacher should be effectiveness rather than accuracy²¹, grammar should be seen as a tool of improving communication rather than a tool of looking for or correcting errors.

¹⁴ for more sources see M. Šmejkalová i S. Štěpáník, *Teaching Czech language and literature in the Czech Republic*, [w:] *Teaching of national languages in the V4 countries*, red. M. Pieniążek i S. Štěpáník, Praha 2016, s. 31–63.

¹⁵ D. Myhill i A. Watson, *The role of grammar in the writing curriculum: A review of the literature*, „Child Language Teaching and Therapy“ 2014, nr 1, s. 44.

¹⁶ J. Kostečka, *Obrana centrálního hodnocení maturitních prací proti zlobivým jeho utrhačům*, „Učitelství noviny“ 2012a, nr 26, s. 17; J. Kostečka, *Rekviem za státní maturitu z češtiny*, „Učitelství noviny“ 2012b, nr 31, s. 15; M. Čechová, *Smysl středoškolského studia češtiny ve stínu maturit*, „Český jazyk a literatura“ 2013, nr 1, s. 1–6; our own teaching experience.

¹⁷ K. Rysová, *Několik postřehů z výuky českého jazyka a literatury na SŠ*, „Český jazyk a literatura“ 2005/06, nr 5, s. 232–234; our own teaching experience.

¹⁸ J. Palečková, V. Tomášek i J. Basl, *Hlavní zjištění výzkumu PISA 2009*, Praha 2010; J. Palečková et al., *Hlavní zjištění PISA 2012*, Praha 2013.

¹⁹ comp. I. Pavelková, A. Škaloudová i V. Hrabal, *Analýza vyučovacích předmětů na základě výpovědí žáků*, „Pedagogika“ 2010, nr 1, s. 38–61.

²⁰ D. Myhill, *Ways of knowing: Writing with grammar in mind*, „English Teaching: Practice and Critique“ 2005, nr 3, s. 77–96; D. Myhill i A. Watson, *The role of grammar in the writing curriculum: A review of the literature*, „Child Language Teaching and Therapy“ 2014, nr 1, s. 41–62; R. Andrews et al., *The effect of grammar teaching on writing development*, „British Educational Research Journal“ 2006, nr 1, s. 39–55.

²¹ comp. D. Myhill, *Ways of knowing: Writing with grammar in mind*, „English Teaching: Practice and Critique“ 2005, nr 3, s. 79.

(1) Contextualized.

Even in British L1 didactics, where the concept of “contextualized grammar teaching” is a well-established one (even curricular documents use it), it is not very clear what is really meant by the word “contextualized”²². How we understand it in our conditions is that grammar should be taught in a way that the pupils see its usefulness in their communication. In practice this means teaching knowledge about language on authentic and current language material, on texts and speech, and also letting the pupils use the phenomena in their own production. Analysing isolated examples (words or sentences), which so often are used in our schools, is not what we encourage teachers to do.

(2) Communicative and functional.

This point is very closely connected to the preceding one. Pupils should know why they are learning the language phenomena they are learning, i.e. what is the “overlap” into their own communication²³. If we want them to transform verbs in active voice into passive voice, do they know why they are doing it? What stylistic, pragmatic and semantic aspects this involves? How it makes their communication more effective? In which communication contexts and for which communication purposes they can use it? We do not educate future linguists, but future users of the language. It is teaching knowledge about language for real communication – so that the pupils really are able to make deliberate / informed choices about the language phenomena they use²⁴.

(3) Tied to the pupil’s preconceptions.

All native speakers come to school equipped with something we call “natural language competency”²⁵ which is a kind of “concentrated” experience with using the language in everyday communication situations.

The research on preconceptions in Czech language shows that even primary school children do understand certain language phenomena and are able to describe their function in communication in their own words²⁶. The role of the school is to transform this unconscious knowledge into conscious one. However, when children

²² comp. D. Myhill, *Ways of knowing: Writing with grammar in mind*, „English Teaching: Practice and Critique” 2005, nr 3, s. 82, who also warns against contextualization which is not done right – a kind of “pseudo-contextualization”.

²³ comp. S. Štěpáník i M. Šmejkalová, *Průvodce začínajícího češtináře*, Praha 2017.

²⁴ comp. T. Locke (Ed.), *Beyond the grammar wars*, Oxon 2010.

²⁵ S. Štěpáník, *Konstruktivismus a jeho didaktické implikace ve vyučování českého jazyka*, „Nová čeština doma a ve světě” 2015, nr 2, s. 11–22.

²⁶ for examples see E. Hájková et al., *Čeština ve škole 21. století – III. Jazykové jevy v dětských prekonceptech*, Praha 2013; E. Hájková et al., *Čeština ve škole 21. století – IV. Výzkum edukačních podmínek jazykových jevů*, Praha 2014; E. Hájková et al., *Czech language in the 21st century school – V*, Praha 2015; M. Šmejkalová, *Teorie didaktických situací – nová výzva pro didaktiku morfolgie českého jazyka*, „Didaktické studie” 2012, nr 1, s. 40–61; S. Štěpáník, *Příklad výzkumu žákovských představ v české syntaxi*, „Pedagogická orientace” 2014, nr 1, s. 111–127; S. Štěpáník i J. Slavík, *Žákovské prekoncepty jako konstitutivní prvek výuky mateřského jazyka*, „Pedagogická orientace” 2017, nr 1, s. 58–80; in Slovak L. Liptáková et al., *Integrovaná didaktika slovenského jazyka a literatúry pre primárne vzdelávanie*, Prešov 2011.

come to school, these preconceptions are almost completely ignored despite the fact that they are one of the most important individual characteristics of the learner²⁷.

(4) Grammar seen as “a dynamic description of language in use”²⁸.

It is necessary to see grammar as dynamic, not static, as descriptive rather than prescriptive. In this respect, it is also necessary to accept the substandard varieties of language, which in Czech (and also other Slavic languages including Polish) are used in every-day communication. Teachers very often tend to aim at eradicating these language varieties as they consider them improper²⁹. But children use this kind of language every day and it serves their communication purposes just fine. Instead of “clearing” the pupil’s code we should aim at developing the ability to switch codes – according to the communication purpose and the communication situation.

(5) Grammar seen as a tool giving the pupil linguistic choices and raising the pupil’s language awareness.

With language awareness we understand a structure which has a (a) cognitive, (b) affective and (c) conative part – which involves (ad a) language reason with which we reflect language, (ad b) language sense with which we “sense” language and (ad c) language action with which we use / execute language³⁰. It is not only the knowledge about the language that L1 teachers develop, but it is the ability to use the knowledge in practice. If pupils have “genuine understanding”³¹ of the language system, if they understand how the language phenomena they learn at school improve or influence their communication, if they see them in context, they can make deliberate linguistic choices³².

Conclusion

It is clear that there is still a lot of work ahead for Czech language didacticians – both in research when looking for the most optimal conception of teaching Czech to native speakers and in the educational reality of schools where a complete alteration of didactic thinking is sometimes required. One thing, however, stays true all the time: all reforms start with the teacher, not with any kind of official declarative (even a very good one).

²⁷ P. Doulík i J. Škoda, *Reflexe nad základními aspekty konstruktivistického pojetí výuky v přírodovědných předmětech*, „Pedagogická revue“ 2003, nr 5, s. 470–481.

²⁸ DES, *Report of the committee of inquiry into the teaching of English language (Kingman report)*, London 1988.

²⁹ comp. J. Svobodová, *Jazyková specifika školské komunikace a výuka mateřštiny*, Ostrava 2003.

³⁰ comp. S. Štěpáník i J. Slavík, *Žákovské prekoncepty jako konstitutivní prvek výuky mateřského jazyka*, „Pedagogická orientace“ 2017, nr 1, s. 58–80.

³¹ H. Gardner, *The unschooled mind: How children think and how schools should teach*, New York 1991.

³² e.g. the method of sentence combining as an example of a practical approach to improving the syntactic maturity of students in English – see R. Andrews et al., *The effect of grammar teaching on writing development*, „British Educational Research Journal“ 2006, nr 1, s. 39–55.

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Abstract

Knowledge about language and its relation to communication skills (or competency) development has been a current topic of L1 didactics not only in the Czech Republic for decades. How much and what kind of knowledge about language do our pupils need? And how does this knowledge align with the development of communication skills?

The paper analyses the phenomenon described above in both the historical and contemporary perspective focusing specifically on the situation in the Czech Republic, but also putting the issue in a broader international context.

Key words: L1, teaching, knowledge about language, grammar, communication skills, communication competency

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