

Teaching Albanian Language at School: Textbook Evaluation

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Abstract: Despite the studies on first language acquisition, we know little about how languages are learnt. During the five years children learn the language, not by imitating adults, but by building their own grammar. Studies have shown that oral language competence plays an important role in respect to early academic success. However, not all learners enter school with the same receptive skills. Children who are not able to manage adequately the first years of formal teaching at school, struggle a lot with their academic progress (Hay I., & Fielding-Barnsley R., 2009). The present paper aims to provide a critical analysis of textbook's role in the process of improving and developing the receptive and expressive skills of learners as part of their academic progress. Different problems regarding the structuring of knowledge in textbooks are discussed. In addition, we make suggestions on how the disadvantages in the textbooks can be improved. This paper concludes that grammar textbooks and the teaching methodology in Albanian classrooms are focused towards the realization of linguistic knowledge independent of the ability to use them in real life contexts.

Key words: competence, textbooks, classroom activities, teaching and learning process.

1. Introduction

It is amazing the large amount of language a child acquires during the first five years. The question of how children learn the mother tongue in such a short period of time has resulted in a number of theories. As early as 1959, in his controversy with the psychologist B. Skinner, N. Chomsky (1959) rejected the behaviorist thesis that the child learns the language through imitation (Skinner, 1957). Instead, he formulated the hypothesis that children are born with knowledge of the fundamental principles of grammar. It is this inborn knowledge that helps children acquire the native language effortlessly despite the complexity of the process (Chomsky, 1981).

Furthermore, knowledge of language is considered by Chomsky as a knowledge that can neither be learnt nor taught to its speakers (Chomsky, 2004). The fact that the child becomes fluent in a language despite the short time of exposure is a remarkable fact that supports Chomsky's hypothesis. The innate language knowledge of the fundamental organizing principles of grammar common to all language, is called by Chomsky as Universal Grammar which consists of rules that apply to all languages (principles) and rules that apply only to groups of

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languages or to specific languages (parameters). For example, while the presence of the subject in the sentence constitutes a universal principle, Albanian language allows subject omission which is a parameter. This theory which has gained both praise and criticism (Piaget, 2004) made Chomsky one of the most controversial linguistics in the past century.

Even if we accept Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar the language development will not occur if it is not activated through language use and language interaction. Language use and interaction are crucial to the process of language learning not only in the early years but throughout the child's experience in school. This is due to the fact that language learning is affected by the language interaction both at home and in school as well as the quality of this interaction.

2. School and Language Competence

As previously mentioned, the most rapid language acquisition occurs at the age of 5 when children have ratified and completed their grammar without taking any direct teaching (Owens, 1996). This is known as oral language competence which refers to a set of auditory-verbal skills (listening and talking) acquired and developed from birth onwards. Children enter school as fluent speakers of their native language. However, the elaboration and the understanding of the grammar continues beyond this age, especially when children become part of the education system.

An important feature of language learning is the development of literacy since the ability to read and comprehend texts is indispensable to academic success and to function effectively in society. Receptive skills (talking and listening) are critical in the early years of school. Children who enter school with well-developed talking and listening (communication) skills are the one who have an academic success across the entire school curriculum (Dockrell, Lindsay & Palikara, 2010). During the first years in school children take formal literacy instruction. After that they enter a second phase that represents the shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Hines, Wibles & McCartney, 2010).

In recent years, the school curriculum is continuously challenged by the development in technology. Although internet usage is encouraged at school due to the large amount of information it stores, it is causing some harm to language. For instance, the use of English keyboards have made that the spelling rules of Albanian language are forgotten. So instead of the vowel *ë* learners use *e* and instead of *ç* they use *c*. Another tendency observed in the formal writings of Albanian learners is the use of informal language.

To keep up with the rapid evolution in technology and society the Albanian education system continuously pays a great attention to the Albanian language curriculum. Albanian language is a compulsory subject at both the primary and secondary level. The Albanian curriculum is based on two principles (Izha, 2012):

- (1) Reading and writing are inextricably linked to language use
- (2) Children learn through language

The first principle aims at developing speaking, listening through the reading and writing of different fictional and non-fictional texts both printed and electronic as well as developing the skill of creative and critical thinking. The second principle relates to the use of text for different purposes and needs. It aims at developing learners' linguistic skills that are appropriate to enable them to benefit from the education system and social life outside school.

Among the other didactic aids used as tools to reach the educational aim, the grammar textbook plays a very important role. It is the main resource from which learners get the information as well as other knowledge. On the other hand, it serves and supports the teacher.

However, Albanian textbooks do not seem to have the required level of quality and neither do they take into account the age of the target groups. Albanian language has a complex morphology which makes it difficult to learn. Leaving aside those areas of grammar which can be understood with little teaching, we are still left with much grammar to be fitted into the teaching program. Therefore, the main problem in designing textbooks is to set and follow some criteria which will help linguists decide whether or not a grammar item is worth concentrating on and to what extent and what didactic tools are necessary to use in order to achieve the goals. In the next section we will discuss some of these criteria by emphasizing the fact that if these criteria are ignored learners will not be able to make correct structural choices and show an accurate spontaneous use of them.

3. Problems with Albanian Textbooks

Learners' results in Albanian language final exam taken upon the completion of the secondary school are far from being satisfactory. The low scores on student's knowledge in Albanian language made us consider the grammar textbooks and in particular their move from theory to practice and the gap that exists between the two. More specifically, we studied the way a grammar item "Relative clause" is presented in the textbooks of the 6th grade (Gjokutaj et al., 2011), 8th grade (Gjokutaj et al., 2011) and 9th grade (Jashari et al., 2011). At a quick glance, what strikes us about those texts is that they consist mostly of theoretical knowledge leaving little room for communicative practice. In our view, some of the limitations of Albanian textbooks are as follows:

Teaching too much grammar at once makes it difficult to prioritize which items are most useful for learners and achieve a full understanding and accurate use of them. In the textbook of the 6th grade, four types of relative clauses (subject, adverbial, direct and indirect object) and the syntactic schemes of their relation to the main clause accompanied by examples where these rules apply, are introduced simultaneously in one page. The deductive approach (rule-driven approach) is used for their presentation. This is of course a heavy burden on learners' memory that will result with a mechanical repetition of the structures but will not help learners absorb the structures properly and produce them correctly. The 6th grade's book is meant for 12 year old learners who are introduced to relative clauses for the first time. Explaining the grammar rule deductively by introducing complicated rules without giving learners the chance to personalize their use and be able to produce their own sentences is a danger of rapid loss of attention and failure.

Repetition of the same information might negatively affect students' motivation and diminishes their curiosity to learn new concepts. In the textbooks of the 8th and 9th grades we observed that the same information is repeated without adding any new concepts or improving learners' knowledge in regard to the function of relative clauses in the sentence.

(a) In the textbook of the 8th grade, under the section *Funksioni* "Function" we find the following definition: Në fjalinë e përbërë pjesa e nënrenditur përcaktore luan të njëjtin funksion që luajnë përcaktorët në fjalinë e thjeshtë. "In complex sentences the relative clause plays the same function that determinants play in simple sentences." — The same definition is repeated in the textbook of the 9th grade: Ashtu si mbiemrat edhe emrat ose grupet emërore në fjalinë e thjeshtë, pjesa e nënrenditur përcaktore kryen në fjalinë e përbërë funksionin e përcaktorit. "Like adjectives, nouns or noun phrases in simple sentences, the relative clause performs in the

complex sentence the same function as the determinants.”

(b) Another example is the definition of the relative clauses: *Pjesa e nënrenditur përcaktore përcakton një gjymtyrë të pjesës kryesore të shprehur: me emër, me grup emëror ose me përemër*. “The relative clause defines an important constituent in the main clause expressed with a noun, nominal group or pronoun” (8th grade textbook). – the same definition is found in the 9th grade textbook – *Siç shihet dhe nga shembujt, pjesa e nënrenditur përcaktore përcakton një gjymtyrë të pjesës kryesore të shprehur me emër (ndër planetët) ose me një grup emëror (mbi tre stolat). Por kjo gjymtyrë e pjesës kryesore mund të jetë e shprehur edhe me përemër* “As can be seen from the examples given above, the relative clause defines an important constituent of the main clause expressed with a noun (ndër planetët) or a noun phrase (mbi tre stolat). It can also be expressed with a pronoun.”

(c) The same holds true about the information given under the sections *Rendi i pjesëve* “Position of constituents in the clause” — 8th grade textbook, and *Ndërtimi* “Structure”— 9th grade textbook — where the same concepts are repeated with no reason.

The level of difficulty must increase with an increase in age. It is logical to start with simple and basic concepts which relate to the previous knowledge and only gradually progress to more difficult ones. The main structures presented in the textbooks should be suitable to the age of learners. If this criterion is not respected it will clash with the criterion of accuracy. It is normal for learners to seek high standards of accuracy because they want to have a good command of their language. This is of course based on the wrong belief that perfectionism is what is expected at school. But if learners fail because the level of difficulty is beyond their understanding they will create a psychological barrier that will prevent them from being successful and satisfy their personal aspirations.

For example, instead of introducing all types of relative clauses at once the textbook should start with subject and object (left or right) relative clauses: *Djali që takove dje është miku im* — “the boy who you met yesterday is my best friend” and only after such structures are learned, should the learners be introduced to more complicated structures such as the embedded relative clauses: *vajza që djali po puth është fqinja ime* — “the girl that the boy is kissing is my neighbor”.

The same holds true for every aspect of grammar despite the fact that it might be a phrase, a clause, a sentence or a single word. For example, Albanian relative pronouns should be presented step by step. Albanian textbooks should start with simple relative pronouns: *që, i cili* “who”; then the relative pronouns that are part of a pronominal phrase e.g., *nga i cili, me të cilin, prej të cilit* “from who, with whom, with which”; and finally relative pronouns in genitive case which are always preceded by a noun: *“Ktheu kryet nga gramafoni, pllaka e ngecur e të cilit shkaktonte gërvimën...”* — He turned his head at the gramophone, whose plate was not moving... Relative pronouns of this kind are typically bookish, as the result they should be treated carefully and practiced enough to become part of learners’ language competence.

Furthermore, the level of difficulty in exercises does not match learners’ age. In the textbooks of the 6th grade we find more complex and difficult exercises than in the textbooks of the 8th and 9th grades. While students of the 6th grade deal with difficult grammar exercises which require the drawing of the syntactic schemes that represent the relation of clauses in complex sentences composed of more than two main clauses and more than two subordinate clauses, learners of the 8th and 9th grade deal with easy exercises that require the identification of relative pronouns or the boundaries between main and subordinate clauses.

Comprehensibility is a good criterion to follow when teaching grammar. If a grammar item is taught carefully, the learners will understand it better. Comprehensibility refers not only to the presentation of knowledge but also to the practice activities. The lack of clearness in the formulation of the questions that test students

understanding has become lately a common feature for most of the textbooks in Albania. In many textbooks, the exercises and activities are not formulated correctly and sometimes it is not clear what they expect learners to do. The exercises are not clear and sometimes are mixed with other grammatical phenomena.

For example, in the textbook of the 8th grade, unit “Relative Clause”, we find the following exercise: “Describe your classmate or best friend using only a few simple sentences. To make a full description, change your sentences into relative clauses.” In our opinion, it is not clear what is meant by full description, how long it should be, why simple or coordinated sentences are not suitable for writing a full description. Instead, we suggest that the above exercise is formulated as follows:

“Describe your classmate or best friend using relative clauses. E.g., “My best friend is called Anna. She lives in the city of Vlora, **which** is located in southern Albania. She lives with her parents, **who** work”

Another drawback we would like to address is the lack of exercises that encourage the use of language structures in a **creative way**. Albanian textbooks are extremely unrealistic. It is important for learners to have plenty of contextualized examples of the grammar structure. The contextualized examples should be fit appropriately to the needs of the target group so that the learners can adapt grammar into appropriate situations. Albanian textbooks contain grammar units that are introduced in sentences taken out of the context and full of nuisance vocabulary which distracts learners’ attention from the relevant grammar item. The use of grammar units in spoken or written authentic communications is rare. These examples are hard to interpret because they are taken out of the context.

The most common types of communicative activities in these textbooks are meaningless. Learners are not given the chance to personalize the grammar structure and have a limited choice to use the language of their preference. Each presentation is followed by some practice activities which focus on the form rather than the meaning. Learners are asked either to draw complicated syntactic schemes representing the relations between dependent and independent clauses or find the boundaries between relative and main clauses. They are not given the chance to practice and show understanding of the taught grammar structure since the textbook pays greater attention to accuracy focused practice rather than fluency focused practice.

Pair and group work is another disadvantage of Albanian textbooks. Unfortunately, they do not contain activities that encourage students to communicate with their classmates. Most of the exercises are based on an individual work without giving learners the chance to engage in a creative group work. Our suggestion is that grammar textbooks contain exercises which enable learners to practice grammar while saying real and interesting things to each other. The disadvantage of the Albanian textbooks is that they do not enable learners to use the language they have learnt by communicating about their lives. The textbooks should enable learners to talk and write about things that are important and interesting for their age group (like, hobbies, summer activities, TV programs, books, animals, likes and dislikes etc). For example, for the 6th grade learners we would suggest exercises like the following one:

Using relative clauses describe what you like or dislike in people:

I like people who

I dislike people who.....

For a better understanding of embedded relative clauses, we suggest that the 8th and 9th grade learners are engaged in activities that require pair and group work which are particularly beneficial:

Divide the class into groups of 2 to 3 students. Each group must give a definition for the following words using embedded relative clauses. Vote to choose the group that has given the best definition:

e.g., Kangaroo (other words could be: lemon, squirrel, square, doctor, etc):

- The animal, on whose body there is a pouch for baby to stay, is called kangaroo.
- Kangaroo, which lives in Australia, is a mammal.
- Kangaroo, which eat leaves, is known as herbivore.

4. Conclusions

Analyzing the way language items are presented in Albanian textbooks of the secondary level education we conclude that the main purpose of language textbooks is to present a detailed theoretical knowledge of language, ignoring its practice and use in real life contexts. In other words, the main purpose of grammar textbooks and the class activities is to provide a thorough comprehensive knowledge of the grammar through explanations and rule-learning by heart ignoring completely the communicative practice, peer-teaching, grammar games and contextualized examples. From the data gathered in the process of textbooks' analysis we conclude that the problems with those textbooks are as follows:

Classroom activities are totally controlled by the book and the teacher. Nothing happens without teachers' consent and the students are not given the opportunity to start activities without having received their teachers' consent. This means that only the exercises discussed in the classroom, but also the language the students produces or hear is controlled by the teacher and the textbook. Thus, it is the classroom which controls learners' linguistic behavior.

Giving learners too much information does not work well. Learners will not be able to assimilate the whole information. In addition, too much explanation harms the teaching-learning process. Teachers should know what to teach. They should know that they do not have to teach the whole truth. Their explanation should be short, simple and clear so that learners are able to remember and act on it. What makes the situation more dramatic is that a deductive approach covers 80% of the grammar presentation.

The examples used to represent a certain grammar unit and the exercises included in the text are based on sentences that are very different from the structures learners use in their everyday communication outside the classroom. In most of their linguistic activities students are limited and forced to use certain structures through mechanical and meaningless exercises. In addition, we find examples extracted from literature. Due to their elaborated and emotive vocabulary they can very easily distract learners' attention from the taught grammar, e.g., *Dëgjonte me vështrimin nga rruga mbi të cilën harkonin degët e pjergullës; Pilo Shpiragut, që (i cili) shponte në atë kohë Kazilin, i shpëtoi hosteni nga duart.* — “Staring at the street along which lined the grapes branches, Pilo Shpiragu, who was at that time prickling Kazil with a stick, dropped the gad from his hands.” Consequently, we can say that the language used in the classroom differs from the one used in everyday life. What we need is real examples which can perform pedagogic purposes.

The exercises are not related to activities that require the exchange of information between listeners and speakers like in real life. The language is selected and structured in terms of the activities contained in the textbooks and students are forced to participate while the other components of discourse are excluded. Therefore, students are asked to practice and produce utterances without having anything to say. What is more important, textbooks should contain a more varied choice of exercises which would make the teaching of grammar more

enjoyable and many-sided.

In conclusion, given that there is a difference between language skills and the ability to use them in specific situations, it would be reasonable that textbooks writers include more exercises which aim at a more dynamic use of language, reducing the unnecessary theoretical information and treating with more care the complex syntactic structures. In addition, textbooks should include the use of authentic and simplified discourse in order to provide learners with contextualized use of structures. As a result, we will have better users of language even though they might probably not be the best “linguists”. We believe that ignoring the processes of language use in classrooms will lead to a deficient competence. Trying to teach language at school with the focus only on the linguistic rules cannot be fully successful.

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