

Selecting teaching materials for the practical German grammar

COURSE

Tatiana N. Nikolaeva

North Eastern Federal University

(RUSSIA)

tnikolaeva@mail.ru

ABSTRACT

The article discusses a range of issues related to teaching the practical grammar of the modern German language as a major foreign language for Philology students. The range includes such issues as the structure and the content of modern textbooks; contrasting to the native, first and/or second foreign languages; the selection of relevant teaching materials. Nowadays, the particular attention should be paid to the communication-focused teaching of the practical grammar, given its functional significance.

Key words: learning grammar, communicative-functional orientation, context, teaching grammar, grammatical phenomenon, German language, native language, foreign language, practical grammar, teaching materials

Nowadays, the practical purpose of teaching foreign languages is mastering a language in all its functions, which means the maximum approach to the fluent command of a foreign language and productive communication with native speakers of the foreign language. However, in reality, instructors quite often fail to reach this goal for several reasons.

The article covers only some issues connected with the methods of teaching the practical German grammar in a linguistic institution, such as: the analysis of structure and content of some contemporary textbooks, contrasting to a native, first and/or second foreign languages, which brings about the problem of selecting relevant teaching materials.

In practical grammar of any foreign language, rules are merely a key to understanding it; their correct production in practice is more important.

It is known that both written and oral exercises on various rules are used to learn and master the theory of grammar. Some textbooks are full of long single-type drills, often with the only task to read in pairs, to fill in missing prepositions, missing articles, to transform sentences and so on, leaving behind their functional significance. We should assume then that most of such exercises are drills for polishing certain rules and forming grammatical skills.

When selecting teaching materials, instructors always face the problem of choosing between domestic and foreign authors. Today, there is a plenty of textbooks and teaching aids on the practical German grammar, for example, *German Grammar in Exercises*, *German Grammar with Exercises*, *Texts on German Grammar*, *Theory and Exercises on German Grammar*, etc., which are written and compiled by domestic authors, either alone or with their German peers. Here, teachers are to make their choice basing on the language competence of students, including such factors as whether the foreign language is the first or second for the students, or the group composition, for example, whether it is a monolingual or multilingual one. The important thing is not the linguistic material only, but also the speaking material for the general communicative orientation of students, with taking into consideration realities of both the foreign language and own countries. In this respect, it makes sense to use materials from authentic sources, for example, textbooks and teaching aids published abroad and written by native speakers of the language in subject.

Teaching grammar of any language requires consideration of the native or first foreign languages, or the experience of learning another foreign language.

In our case, it is critical to take into account the group composition, which can consist of students who all speak Yakut, or be mixed with Russian-speaking and Yakut-speaking students. This factor requires the proper contrasting of languages, which promotes deeper understanding of the material with the support on the native language, something known; moreover, it develops the skills of independent analysis of linguistic phenomena. For instance, the German language has verbs with separable and inseparable prefixes (parts), reflexive verbs, impersonal verbs, auxiliary verbs, etc. All these verbs have no analogues in the Yakut language; for the reflexive verbs, one can compare them to the Russian reflexive verbs, like *мытьcя* (wash oneself), *одеваться* (dress oneself), *интересоваться* (be interested), etc. Auxiliary verbs can be explained with the use of similar English verbs, since they do not exist in the Russian verb system and the Yakut verb system either. Verbs are directly related to the time category in the German language, which is realized in three related meanings – the present, the past and the future. Whereas the Russian language uses three tenses to express these three time meanings, the German language has six tenses. The problem is that it is complicated by the relative time, which does not exist in the Russian and Yakut languages. While in the German, Russian and English languages the temporal forms are built by the analytical means, the Yakut language utilizes the synthetic means. The peculiarities of the time category cause significant problems when learning the German tenses system.

It is important to know the correct word order in the sentence for the practical production of speech in any language. The fixed word order within the so called 'frame construction' of the German sentence can be violated

by less strict syntactical rules of other languages. For example, in the Russian language, one can vary the word order in the sentence; with the fixed order in the Yakut language, the predicate can be placed in the end of the sentence. The existence of 'the frame construction' in the German language requires the fixed position of the predicate in the sentence, which can be infringed by the transfer of norms from other languages. For example, instead of *ich will dieses Buch lesen*, students use their own order: *ich will lesen dieses Buch*, similar to the Russian variant: *я хочу читать эту книгу* (I want to read this book); and in the Yakut language, the predicate is placed in the end of the sentence. Therefore, students know the idea of the fixed word order in the sentence from the English language only (Nikolaeva, 2012:106).

The sentence, being a specific syntactical unit, represents an integral structural component of any language; in particular, any narrative sentence has a certain, stable in a given language structure, which can be presented by the formula S + P +

This formula is relevant for most Indo-European languages, whereas for Turkic languages, with the predicate being in the end of the sentence, the formula is slightly different: S + ... + P.

On this stage, appealing to the previous experience of learning the first foreign language is a way to facilitate the mastering and correct compilation of sentences with the focus on the aim of speaking.

As the content structure of textbooks on the practical grammar greatly depends on authors, instructors should develop their own methods of presenting grammatical phenomena with the focus on practical usage of this linguistic material in speech. Here we should talk about differentiating grammatical phenomena depending on the need to learn this or that phenomenon at a certain moment, and on the difficulty of understanding and learning the grammatical phenomenon itself. Young instructors may find the sequential learning of new material complicated, whether one should explain grammar rules step by step, assisting every stage with relevant exercises, or follow the sequence in which the material is placed in domestic publications, that is to say, cover the material from the beginning to the end, in the way it is given in a textbook or a teaching aid.

In her *New Grammar of the German Language* (Kazantseva, 2006:4), Yu. M. Kazantseva offers the systemic work on the following themes: Syntax of the simple sentence, The Verb in the Present Tense and Imperative Mood, The Noun, The Adjective, The Pronoun, Prepositions, The Article. The set of exercises offered is built in accordance with the simple-to-complex principle from drills to creative tasks, which promotes skills of grammatically correct oral and written speech. The linguistic material of the textbook is taken from authentic sources only; they are of the cognitive nature, very informative, thus, their content facilitates reaching the set goals.

Some German publications present the grammar material so that to learn the most significant linguistic phenomena first: the simple sentence and its parts, most common types of subordinate clauses. Then comes the conjugation of adjectives and other parts of speech and their syntactical functions, as well as the *Konjunktiv*. The usage of prepositions is rather a semantic than grammatical matter, so it is recommended to use the material from this section along with studying the previous ones (Hilke Dreyer, Richard Schmitt, 2001:3).

In the additional teaching aids to the textbook *Themen neu 2* and *Themen aktuell 2*, with exercises to learn and master lexical and grammatical topics, the authors suggest following the sequence in which the material is given in the units of the textbook. The exercises provided have various tasks from simple to complex – from translating separate word combinations and sentences to translating texts and dialogues on a topic. Thus, all the materials of the teaching aid are governed by the practical goals of teaching German, which determine the communicative and functional orientation of the exercises and tasks. The authors believe this approach to stimulate stable skills of fluent speaking and writing in various communicative situations (Kondakova, 2007:3).

The G. K. Karapetyan, when developing *The Course of Practical German Grammar* (Karapetyan, 2:3) bases on the following principles:

1. Any modern course of a foreign language should give students the understanding of the grammatical system of the language and the knowledge of the foreign grammar basics in contrasting with the native language basics; this is essential for mastering speaking skills, necessary for all professionals to communicate with representatives of other cultures and mentalities, academic schools. The command of the grammatical system is tested in the direct communication.

2. It is critical not only to comprehend a written text, but also to express one's view in a foreign language correctly, to write summaries, papers, and documents.

3. When teaching grammar at present, one should consider not only the traditional approach to explaining morphology, word formation and syntax, but also new trends in presenting the grammatical material. Therefore, the author thinks that the goal of the teaching aid is not only to acquaint students with basic grammatical phenomena of the German language, but also to teach skills of independent practical usage of the knowledge gained in speaking and writing.

We believe that the arrangement of the grammatical material is to take into account the sequence of covering the entire material on the practical course of the language, especially at courses with aspect-based teaching of a foreign language. This approach helps students to perceive the language as a system and to understand that the sound command of the language is impossible without knowing its grammatical rules. It is obvious that the aspect-based approach is relative, and it does not limit using the language phenomena of different levels for expressing the same content. On lessons of certain aspects, for example, Analytical Reading or Communicative German, a text or any other context can be used for illustrating different meanings in one synonymic row, both lexical and grammatical.

In order to demonstrate and understand a grammatical phenomenon semantically, it is better to offer students texts, since they contain the whole range of the language means and devices. Thus, students can choose adequate linguistic means for realizing the communicative task, as well as combine the material in

different ways depending on communicative situations, an objective of speaking, etc. In this respect, it makes sense to check the students' skills by making them talk on a topical issue. For example, „*Ich habe Angst, die Arbeit zu verlieren*“, „*Ich habe einen Traum, die ganze Welt zu bereisen*“, etc. This task is primarily focused on mastering the infinitive construction with the participle *zu*; however, when discussing the unemployment and the possibility of a round-the-world trip, along with this construction, students can use other, also important grammatical phenomena, essential for building a sentence. Such tasks expose the extent of practical command of this or that grammatical phenomenon and the degree of conscious choice of the grammatical phenomenon by its meaning.

Merely learning a text by heart has a positive effect, too; however, this activity turns out to be methodologically useless, as it fails to teach the acquired skills in practice without a communicative task.

It is known that a speaker communicates with another person with the use of expressions. Expressions represent the realization of the person's communicative intention under the following scheme: from the content (what I want to say) to the form, i.e. how I am going to say that. For example, when making a presentation, the student uses the present tense *praesens* or *praeteritum* to tell about past events, while when discussing students can use the complex tense *perfekt*. This activity helps to consider verb tenses in relation to the meanings they express, with each offered form chosen due to its function in the given context. It becomes possible to build an expression with the variation of linguistic units in the process of their functioning. In this case, the speaker selects relevant words and expressions, and builds communication-determined sentences following the language rules.

However, when studying the usage of grammatical forms, it is necessary to consider general laws of their functioning in the language, i.e. to distinguish the usage of a form as a main one for expressing a certain meaning (for example, *futurum* for expressing a coming action) and the usage of other forms for expressing the same meaning (for example, *praesens* for expressing a coming action); thus, one can see the synonymy of these forms in the given context.

O. E. Mikhailova writes that teaching grammar should be focused on communication from the very beginning. This approach will help students to realize that grammar is one of the main means ensuring communication. The communication-oriented teaching of grammar requires the consideration of the communication spheres, objectives and conditions, determined by actual communication situations and social standings of the communication partners. Therefore, teaching grammar should be style-oriented: it is critical to draw students' attention to the fact that the usage of grammatical forms and constructions, as well as lexical units, is determined by not only the language norms, but also the speech norms (Mikhailova, 1991:306).

The purposeful work on the language with the use of wider context, relevant exercises, and focus on the function of this grammatical phenomenon – all this contributes to the automatic formation of grammatical forms; moreover, it promotes adequate choice of a grammatical phenomenon depending on a communicative task of the expression.

Thus, the instructor should be very thoughtful in choosing the right material, so that the rules and exercises are comprehensible, useful, practical, and easy to learn.

As we see in practice, the excessive appeal to the theory of grammatical phenomenon on lessons on the practical grammar, especially making students learn long and complex rules by heart, fails to bring desired results.

Therefore, the ultimate goal of the process of teaching practical grammar depends on both the choice of teaching materials and its presentation structure, as well as the optimum realization in practice, with taking into account the functional motivation of its usage.

REFERENCES

1. H. Dreyer, R. Schmitt. Lehr- und Übungsbuch der deutschen Grammatik. – Max Hueber Verlag, 2001.
2. Yu. M. Kazantseva: (2006). *Novaya grammatika nemetskogo yazyka. Teroiya i uprazhneniya* (New German Grammar. Theory and Exercises): Textbook – Moscow: Vysshaya shkola (Higher School).
3. G. K. Karapetyan *Kurs prakticheskoi grammatiki nemetskogo yazyka s trenirovochnymi i kontrolnymi zadaniyami* (The Course of Practical German Grammar with Exercises and Tests). - Moscow: KDU, 2010. - 350 pp.
4. Ye. A. Kondakova *Posobie po nemetskomu yazyku k uchebniku Themen neu 2 (Teaching Aid to the German Textbook Themen neu 2)*. - Moscow: Iris-press, 2007. - 160 pp.
5. O. E. Mikhailova *Obuchenie grammatike v yazykovom vuze (Teaching Grammar in a Linguistic Institution) // Obshchaya metodika obucheniya inostrannym yazykam (General Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages)*. – Moscow: *Russkii yazyk* (Russian Language), 1991.
6. T. N. Nikolaeva, A comparative analysis in teaching a foreign language //Language, Communication, and Culture. - Buma Publishing Co., Volume 1, 2012. - pp. 102-109.