

INTRODUCING GRAMMAR LEARNING STRATEGIES IN A2 AND B1 CLASSES OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN ALBANIAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The issue of learning strategies remains a complicated matter in the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Although the research has been intensive in the last twenty-five years, it is difficult to draw teaching strategies that fit learning contexts that vary greatly due to particular features of the learner. Furthermore, regarding grammar, teachers are even more convinced that it is their primary duty to lead and monitor the acquisition process in the classroom. The case of schools in Albania, where English is taught as a foreign language, shows that pupils who do well in proficiency tests, do not perform adequately in oral communication for the same grammatical knowledge. This paper aims to introduce a range of available grammar learning strategies for learners of EFL to use in the A2 and B1 levels. The material is accompanied by concrete examples of how grammar learning strategies can be included in lesson plans, based on textbook material. The aim is to render interested readers the awareness of the possible need to increase communicative grammar proficiency in learners of EFL by increasing their awareness of the range of means available to create long-lasting associations between the theory, acquisition, and correct usage of grammar. The earlier the attempts to create independent grammar learners, the sooner the opportunity exists for these learners to reach native-like grammar proficiency.

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Introduction

In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), most researchers (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Cohen & Maroco, 2007; Knight & Lindsay, 2007) focus on teaching methods and learning strategies that enhance the proficient usage of language communicating patterns (written and oral) as close as possible to the standard version. When the EFL learning environment is mostly constituted by classroom intercourse with minimum possibility existing for the learners to use the foreign language, the communication teacher and learner envisages teaching rather than learning as the target; this intercourse focuses on the results of tests or exams as documentary evidence of linguistic achievement of the learner. In this respect, the linguistic knowledge that feeds this acquisition tends to be explicitly presented in a classroom context, by assigning the teacher the role of leader (a status that for many involves "professional safety" reasons that teachers have enjoyed for a long period and would not easily give up). This is more evident in the contextual acquisition of grammar.

In most literature sources related to linguistic skills, the teaching and learning of grammar is considered a means of promoting the linguistic growth of learners through structural organization of all other skills; only when both meaning and form are given sufficient attention is the acquisition in this context complete and learning outcomes reached (Tilfarlioglu & Yalçin, 2005, p. 158). Nevertheless, from the learner's perspective, language form is rarely considered relevant in the way that it affects the accuracy of the message relayed during communication. No matter how mistaken the later point of view may be, in the Albanian context of learning EFL, it is supported by frequent occurrences of learners performing well in patterned exercises that follow a grammar rubric in the textbook or through using accurate grammar structures of the given rubric in the unit test, progress test, or final exam. These students are not always proficient users of these same grammar structures in a communication context. In terms of producing similar patterns of grammatical usage while conveying messages in English, mistakes are more evident. With practice, the range of mistakes diminishes; however, the problem still remains. The learner fails to generate English morphologic and syntactic structural patterns from the range of stored grammar background, as automatically as he or she would do in the case of acquiring the mother tongue. The reasons for this shortcoming go beyond

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the focus range of this given paper. However, the above evidence is likely sufficient for educational players to realize that the earlier the learners become aware of the range of means available for them to remember and use grammar, the better will be their acquisition of such, and thus, their focus will likely revert to communicative fluency rather than test-taking targets of language learning.

In the 1990s, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claimed that "most of the time teachers are more attentive to the product of the learners than the process of learning" (p. 156). In spite of the time difference, this is still relevant in Albanian classes of EFL today; hence, this paper will focus on ways of allowing a EFL teacher to design plans for grammar lessons that intertwine theoretic approaches in the category of grammar learning strategies (GLS) and which allocate classroom time for their practice.

Grammar Learning Strategies

Following previous approaches of different language learning strategies (LLS), Cohen and Pinilla-Herrera (2011) introduced a new point of view with how the term "strategy" should be used. According to these authors, the frequently encountered term, "strategy", referred to more than just "study skills" and "repetition techniques". In fact, it referred to "quite sophisticated cognitive skills such as inference and deducing grammar in a generative way" (Cohen & Pinilla-Herrera, 2011, p. 14). This approach implied that LLSs should not only be considered by teachers as means to provide learners a way to promote their study skills, as "the popularity of the LLS research was the potential it held for affecting learning, both in and outside of the classroom" (Cohen & Pinilla-Herrera, 2011, p. 14). This enquiry drew the attention of researchers towards cognitive LLS use. In our context of research of GLS, it is implied that teachers should not present grammar learning strategies in the classroom to facilitate their pupils' accurate reproduction of foreign language patterns. Instead of conceptualizing grammar acquisition as a set of rules that need to be learnt and accurately followed, teachers need to encourage natural acquisition of grammar as much as possible. In this case, memorization of rules would be substituted by automatic generation of grammar structures and, in such a case, GLSs would serve as compensatory tools to help learners fill voids in their structural use of foreign language patterns.

Earlier than 2005, Anderson (cited in Pawlak, 2009, p. 44) acknowledged that research in GLS up to 2009 had lacked approaches targeting the identification of learning strategies that second language learners used "to learn grammar and to understand its elements". However, unawareness of the availability of such tools as GLSs, on the behalf of the learners, did not prevent learners manipulating their approach towards the new grammar concept, by defining the knowledge they were expected to remember and to cognitively use it. Therefore, GLSs developed into tools that helped the learner draw a planned learning pathway towards reaching their learning outcomes. The teacher's duty, at this stage, would be to facilitate the process by providing a range of strategies from which the learner could select those that fit, not only his or her learning context, but also their approach for acquiring language patterns. Teachers could manage the class not only from a teaching perspective, but also from a learner's perspective. Thus, it is not simply grammar teaching methods that need attention. The teacher should help the learner understand grammar rules as well as the structure of grammar patterns. Only in this way can individual learners actively approach the task and be selective in the use of strategies that work best for them. Considering the view of Oxford (2014, p. 124), that the learner is a "whole person" that manipulates various resources during the acquisition process, it is somewhat understandable why grammar teaching classes should move from a teaching idea "one size fits all" to a more personal approach. This requires teachers to allow time for the individual to learn and encourage them to use GLS, depending on the particular role and nature of requirements.

Following the categorization of O'Malley and Chamot (1990), learning strategies may be metacognitive, cognitive, or social affective, which refer respectively to learners' planning, controlling, and evaluation of their learning by monitoring their own comprehension or linguistic production, and evaluating the outcomes of their own learning. In addition, the strategies relate to the learner's thinking about the learning process by transforming the material to be learned through resourcing, repetition, grouping, deduction, imagery, auditory representation, keyword association, elaboration, transfer, inference, notetaking, summarizing, recombination, and translation; and finally, to the learner's involvement in communication.

From this perspective, the rest of this paper will focus on the allocation provided in an EFL course book for introducing metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective learning strategies in the lesson plan or in the grammar class activities (which in the framework of independent learning, involves out of class or homework activities). This research follows a survey carried out as part of a graduation thesis of a “teacher-to-be” student of EFL at “Fan S. Noli” University of Korçë, Albania. The research was tutored by an author of this article and was aimed at assessing the extent in which GLS were used in two schools of the city where English was taught as a foreign language. Although the study context was limited due to the small number of teachers and pupils interviewed, it revealed a shallow understanding of the term “learning strategies” among the interviewees. On one hand, teachers took great care of the grammar teaching methods, but on the other hand, very few were able to define the meaning of the given GLS in the questionnaire. The teachers acknowledged that there was frequent use of rule provisions and concept explanations for teacher-centered classes in the course book material and which the pupils used deductively in the grammar activities that followed. Inductive learning was neglected, even though the teachers considered the linguistic proficiency of their learners was not an obstacle in this respect.

Pupils of the pre-intermediate level of EFL acknowledged they used various ways of learning grammar, such as practicing the use of graphics, questioning, game activities, memorizing, notetaking, and highlighting important sections, but this they did without awareness of using a GLS; most stated that this was the way they had been learning other language skills, such as vocabulary, or handled reading and listening for comprehension. Finally, there seemed to be goodwill among both EFL teachers and learners towards discovering GLSs (unpublished graduation paper Lukra, 2015). To avoid unawareness about this goodwill, the present study aims to introduce concrete examples of metacognitive strategies available through textbook material for use by pre-intermediate and intermediate learners of EFL. Although this research focuses on a single course book, it may serve as a source of information for teachers of EFL in other learning environments, since the grammatical knowledge that has been selected to support (with examples) the introduction of GLSs is frequently discussed in EFL pre-intermediate and intermediate classes.

Grammar Learning Strategy Integration in the Lesson Plan

The learning context in which this paper focuses is that of second and third year EFL students that receive professional language training and qualification at the “Faik Konica” High School, in Korçë, Albania. In this school, English is taught in four classes each week, in groups that range from 13 to 16 pupils. The course books are “Traveller” Pre-Intermediate; Student’s Book, Work book, Teacher Resource Book by Mitchell (2009), and “Traveller” Intermediate; Student’s Book, Work book, and Teacher Resource Book by Mitchell (2009). Both A2-pre-intermediate and B1-intermediate course books are arranged in eight modules and 16 classes per module, and each is subdivided into sections of vocabulary, grammar, intonation, reading, listening, speaking, writing, and functions. The grammar sections of both levels introduce various topics, such as the use of simple and progressive tenses, infinitive and “-ing”, modals, active and passive, quantifiers, relative pronouns and adverbs, conditionals, question tags, degrees of adjectives, nouns, articles, determiners, clauses of reason, concession, and purpose. The textbook material is envisaged to encourage learner-centered classes due to important elements, as described below:

1. Each module started with “In this module you will...”. The learning outcomes of the first A2 module, were “In this module you will learn to talk about the present and past, learn to talk about past habits, learn to use quantifiers”, while those of the first B1 module were “In this module you learn how to refer to past habits and events”. A careful teacher would not neglect this rubric and would be effective in engaging the pupils in the following module activities, making the learner focus directly on the learning outcomes. Attention drawing tools of this kind help the learner extract relevant knowledge, activities, and therefore, strategies that assist his or her acquisition. At the same time, this sets the ground for effective metacognitive GLSs introduction, usage, or transfer, such as:
2. Setting goals – Designing learning plans helps to achieve learning outcomes;
3. Advance Organization – Previewing the main ideas and concepts of the material to be taught. The teacher can encourage its use by drawing the learner’s attention to the section “In this unit

you will learn...” or by handling pre-grammar activities, such as “Look at the article below and answer the following questions... (all of the questions focusing on the use of present simple interrogative form)”;

4. Selective attention – Attending to phrases, linguistic markers, sentences, or types of information. The learner has to be aware that the individual’s acquisition depends on individual issues of concern. The more the individual learner is aware of the expected acquisition goals, the easier it will be for him or her to reach these goals.
5. At the end of each module, there was a Self-Assessment rubric, in which the learner is asked to tick the boxes for learning outcomes that they deem they possess; for those in which they are unsure, they are required to refer back to the relevant selection in the module. In the A2 first module, this rubric started with “Now I can... Talk about the present and the past... Talk about past habits and use quantifiers”. The same rubric of the B1 first module is divided into six sections (according to the six language skills) with the grammar sections focusing on, “Now I can...use the present Simple and the Present Progressive appropriately, differentiate between stative and non-stative verbs, use question words and form direct and indirect questions, use the Past Simple appropriately and use used to, be used to and get used to refer to habits”.

These sections encouraged the learner to assess the level of his or her acquisition, to compare it with that expected, and define their ability in acquiring the grammar points. They also assessed the effectiveness of the selected GLS. In their daily activities, teachers “sacrifice” these end-of-unit activities in order to compensate for “loss” of time. However, their presence is to be considered a means that allows learners to assess their own use of the GLS and judge their worth in either transferring or later improving their use in similar activities. The two metacognitive strategies that could be introduced at this point are “Self-evaluation” and “Self-monitoring”.

In some modules of the intermediate course book, the grammar and vocabulary sections were introduced as integrated skills. The grammar point of “Wishes and Unreal Past”, for example, is accompanied by a vocabulary section on “Idioms” and the exercise that follows integrates the practice of both. In other modules, the grammar section is directly followed by a speaking activity which requires the use of the given grammar point. For example, B1-Module 2a, introduces the use of “Relative Clauses”, while the instructions for the speaking activity that follows are “Talk in pairs. Go to page 134, look at the prompts and discuss using who, which, where or whose.”

This organization allocated for usage of “compensation strategies”, a term that Sykes (2015, p. 715) defined as facilitators that assist the usage of the target language by the learner “despite limitations in his or her knowledge”. In the view of the author, the learner is inclined to “make up for an inadequate range of grammar and vocabulary, by using such strategies as guessing meaning and usage, asking questions, using synonyms, recombining and using common routines” (Sykes 2015, p. 715). The linguistic competence in this way becomes a strategic one and the learner is able to use the language efficiently. The integration of language acquisition skills enables a teacher to encourage simultaneous and native-like acquisition through practice of both, L2 form and meaning. Pawlak (2008) defined this learning form as “explicit-inductive learning” in which the learner “participates in the rule discovery discussion in class, trying to apply it in a meaningful context as soon as possible” (p. 112).

6. Some modules of the course book had “tips”, which introduce written advice on how the learner can acquire the given knowledge of the introduced skill. For example: “Pay attention to how people speak. Their tone of voice can often help you understand how they feel”; “When you read a text, try to understand which of the unknown words are really important for understanding the text. Try to guess the meaning of as many of these words as possible from the context”; “Learn new words in the context (in sentences describing situations). This way, it is easier to remember them.”; and “When answering questions that refer to gist, don’t focus on details. Try to understand the general meaning of what is being said”. The tips vary and are frequently encountered through the course book (24 pages altogether); there were also seven listening tips, three vocabulary tips, 2 reading tips, and 1 speaking tip.

Even though the primary function of these notes is to substitute or compensate for teaching advice, most are considered a learning strategy (since their aim is to facilitate the learning process). The lack of grammar tips allows for possible intervention, as described in the following issue.

7. The inductive approach was used throughout the module grammar issues of the book and all grammar sections followed the same acquisition pattern; the learners are required to “read the example/ the dialogue and to match them with the phrases that define the grammar rule or with the uses, to complete the rules or to decide what it means, etc.”. In the charts that introduce the grammar points, no grammar theory is presented or reflected in the examples. However, grammar knowledge is presented at the “Grammar Reference” section at the end of the course book. This allows the teacher to postpone talking about grammar theory and structural patterns until the examples or the practical exercises (in which they are reflected) are analyzed by the learner. The learner then has more opportunity to observe grammar in practice, undertake an effort to understand how it works, build comparisons to the mother tongue, and then, where necessary, seek an understanding of the theoretic issues that govern the linguistic functions. In this respect, it becomes possible for him or her to acquire a practical approach to grammar, and the native-like acquisition aspect, which is very important, but tiresome to introduce in a foreign language school learning context.

When the learner is deductively explained the rules and then presented examples in which these are reflected, the acquisition is not active; it becomes a process where the learner stores a duplicated version of a ready-made linguistic patterns. Pawlak (2008) defined it as “explicit-deductive L2 learning”, in which the learner pays attention to “the rules provided by the teacher or the book” (p. 112). The success of the acquisition is measured by means of full compliance of that acquired earlier with that learnt later; this being what teachers normally assess through practical exercises that follow or through unit and progress tests. However, the teaching experience frequently shows that those that compile the proficiency tests may not necessarily be proficient language users. The lack of the inductive acquisition of the grammar points and the follow-up practice possibly indicates this, although, the support of such belief would need long-term research in the context of teaching and learning, the learning styles, the personality traits, gender and age characteristics, and attitude. For the moment, and within the focus of the given paper, the modules of the described course book contain approaches that are integrated with a few deductive approaches included in the intermediate level, in the case of “0-Type Conditional Sentences and Defining and Non-defining Relative Clauses” and in presenting new knowledge not encountered in previous levels of the same course book; and this further indicates learner-centered classes that manage opportunity. This means a teacher is provided the chance to allocate GLS integration in their lesson plan.

At this point, it is useful to introduce GLSs that are available for linguistic levels and which are useful for the teacher to integrate into classes of grammar. Most strategies (Table 1) are part of the O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classification charts, some have been provided by Oxford (1990), and some by Pawlak (2008) regarding the use of diaries to record GLSs from “Advanced Learner's use of strategies for learning grammar: A Diary Study”. These GSLs were mentioned in the survey described above. The reference term for most was not recognized by the teachers nor by the learners, and hence, Table 1 includes supplements to their definition.

Conclusion

The issue of learning strategies is still a complicated matter in the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language. Although the research has been intensive in the last twenty-five years, it is difficult to draw teaching strategies that fit the learning contexts, which vary due to particular features of learner's age, motivation, gender, linguistic performance, attitude, and personality, as well as the (un)willingness of teachers to reflect and fit updated models of learner-centered classes into their lesson plans. Furthermore, in regard to grammar acquisition, teachers are more so convinced that it is their primary duty to lead and monitor the process in the classroom. Since EFL learners handle grammar knowledge with the purpose of test and exam proficiency, teachers insist that the focus of grammar classes should be on teaching correct grammar usage, rather than enabling learners to acquire grammar for the purpose of correct communication.

Table 1: Allocation of grammar learning strategies (GLS) in English as a Foreign Language classes

Grammar Learning Strategies	Definition	Suggested GLS use
Cognitive GLS		
Practicing	Repeating, formally practicing with sounds and writing systems, recognizing and using formulas.	Modals: can, could may, be able to. "Read the example, decide what the words in bold express: ability, permission, or request." This activity is followed by a role-play.
Resourcing	Looking for extra reference material, textbooks, grammar books, dictionary, etc.	Question tags; Clauses of reason, concession, purpose; Nouns, Article and determiners - extra material grammar resource books or monolingual dictionary.
Grouping	Classifying words, terminology, numbers, or concepts according to their attributes.	Classification of verbs and structures followed by the Infinitive and the "-ing" forms.
Notetaking	Writing down key words and concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic or numerical form to assist performance.	Past Simple Vs Present Perfect - Key words on main respective usages. "Use the Present Perfect Simple with just, always, before, ever, never, so far, once, twice, etc."
Highlighting	Using a variety of emphasis techniques (underlining, starring, or color-coding) to focus on important information in the passage.	Using different color coding for future verbs forms and respective meanings- Future with "will", future with Present Simple; future with "present progressive", future with "Going to".
Imagery	Relating new information to visual concepts in memory via familiar, easily retrievable visualization, phrases or locations.	Drawing charts or graphs of using the prepositions in, on, at in time references.
Elaboration	Relating new information to prior knowledge	Elaborating simple comparative constructions to comparative structures like "as adjective as", "not as adjective as".
Transfer	Using previously acquired linguistic and/or concept knowledge to assist comprehension or production.	Use similar function and formation of the Present Progressive in the acquisition of the Past Continuous.
Inferencing	Using available information to guess the meanings of new items, predict outcomes, or fill in missing information	Comparing the use and syntactic functions of the "to-infinitive" with those of the "bare infinitive".
Analyzing contrastively	Comparing elements of the new language with elements of the mother tongue to determine similarities and differences.	Reported Speech – Direct/Indirect Questions undergo similar structural, morphologic and syntactic transformations.
Translating	Using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language.	Define distinctions of meaning in the usage of the modals in constructions like "modal verb + have + past participle".
Social – affective strategies		
Self-encouragement	Finding motives to carry on studying, in spite of early drawbacks.	
Cooperation	Working with one or more peers to obtain feedback, pool information, or model a language activity.	
Questions for clarification	Asking the teacher for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation and/or examples	
Self-talk	Reducing anxiety by using mental techniques that make one feel competent to do the learning task.	

Source: O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Pawlak (2008), Authors

In the Albanian context of learning EFL this is even more problematic. A research carried out in two Albanian EFL schools showed that there was little formal knowledge of the GLSs on the behalf of the learners. They used some learning strategies mentioned in the present paper, but did so unconsciously, or by means of transferring other linguistic skills learning style. The teachers recognized the learning strategy effect for the purpose of learner-centered classes. However, little effort has been undertaken to introduce the correct GLS for grammar classes.

The present paper focused on an applicative issue of introducing GLS into EFL classes, i.e., analyzing concrete grammar issues in the course book used in these classes and providing appropriate grammar learning strategies for each issue. The objectives were threefold. First, it aimed to help teachers overcome the gap that exists between theory and practice in terms of beneficiary application of the GLSs in the classroom. Second, it focused on the three categories of grammar learning strategies and conveyed examples of appropriate grammar teaching and learning aspects of each. Third, the paper may serve as a source for further, long-term research in issues such as the relationship between linguistic proficiency and GLS use, and between GLS use and native-like acquisition of EFL grammar, GLS transference, or alteration in upper-intermediate learners of EFL.

In conclusion, it may be said that, in practice, there is a range of means available for teachers to create long-lasting associations between grammar theory, acquisition, and correct usage. The earlier teachers attempt to encourage grammar-independent learners; the sooner the opportunity will exist for these learners to reach native-like grammar proficiency.

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