Levels of motivation and confidence among first year university learners

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Abstract

This paper explores some motivational aspects of foreign language grammar learning. Subjects are Irish first-year university students of German with five years' previous language learning experience. Findings are presented with regard to learners' reaction to a dedicated grammar class which was designed in order to assist students in the transition from a primarily memory-based approach to language learning to a cognitive-analytical approach. Two cross-sectional sets of investigations were conducted, one at the beginning of the first semester and the other at the end of the second semester, in which both qualitative and quantitative elicitation instruments (interviews and questionnaires) were used. Results for the questionnaires and the follow-up interviews conducted at the end of semester two of year one reveal that learners reacted positively to the grammar programme and that confidence levels with regard to German grammar learning and usage had increased.

Introduction

Impressionistic evidence gathered in the course of the early to mid-1990s suggests that, with the arrival of the communicative approach in modern language instruction in Ireland and Britain, a change has taken place with regard to many secondary school leavers' level of structural knowledge and appreciation of linguistic accuracy (cf. contributions in Harden and Marsh 1993; Rogers 1996; Hawkins and Towell 1996; and Alderson et al. 1996). Although few theorists and practitioners would advocate abandoning any focus on grammar in the classroom, there would appear to be little agreement as to how much structural knowledge the language learner is supposed to acquire under this approach, since the precise role of grammar instruction within the communicative framework has received a wide range of different interpretations (Krashen 1987, Canale and Swain 1988, and Götze 1991).

Similar to other Irish third-level institutions, the German Department at Dublin City University (DCU) found itself confronted from the early 1990s onwards with a situation of considerable variation in the levels of learner competence, proficiency, and performance. Notwithstanding a minority of students with outstanding grammatical knowledge, there was at that time an increasing cohort of learners who, while in many cases possessing fairly good lexical knowledge and perhaps displaying more fluency than learners in previous years, showed grave shortcomings in the area of grammatical competence. Many students seemed to lack even basic knowledge of structural target language properties or, equally problematic, had misconceptions about them.

This paper reports on a programme which was developed at DCU in order to ease the transition from second to third level education on affective and cognitive levels for Irish university students of German. In particular, the paper investigates the effect which formal grammar instruction at university level has had on the above aspects of the foreign language acquisition process. The paper's primary focus is on the levels of motivation and confidence which learners were seen to hold, both at the beginning of their university career and one year into their studies, with regard to the acquisition and application of German grammar. Results will be presented here regarding students' affective and cognitive reaction to the transition from a primarily memory-based approach to language acquisition (cf. Lorigan 1992, Mitchell 1994, and Skehan 1994) to the analytical approach which is still widely considered crucial to a university student's linguistic education.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on motivation. The next section describes the subject selection and course structure, followed by sections which present data collection instruments and results. The terms 'acquisition' and 'learning' will be used interchangeably throughout this article, in line with Ellis (1994).

Review of the literature

Motivation is widely considered a key factor in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Ellis 1994, van Lier 1996, Dörnyei 1998). For more than thirty years, the term 'motivation' was principally associated with the work of Gardner, Lambert, and fellow researchers in Canada (cf. Gardner 1985 and Gardner et al. 1997). In recent years,

calls for a more diverse conceptualization of motivation have repeatedly been made since, according to many researchers, the traditional motivational paradigm has proved to be insufficient and too narrow. One of the major shortcomings of Gardner's model, they argue, is that it rests exclusively on social psychological considerations (cf. Crookes and Schmidt 1991).

Exploring the issue of motivation with regard to practical L2 learning and teaching implications, Oxford and Shearin (1994) argue that findings from branches of psychology such as general, educational, and industrial psychology, as well as cognitive developmental theories, can make a major contribution to language learning. Drawing on various need theories, Oxford and Shearin (1994) stress (a) the importance of meeting L2 learners' requirements for psychological security (in order to keep down anxiety); (b) L2 learners' need to be provided with (i) a variety of clearly identified tasks which are perceived by the learner as important, and (ii) regular and suitable feedback; and (c) the provision of L2 learners with work that will have some beneficial outcome: 'students must believe that doing the specified task will produce positive results and that these results are personally valuable' (Oxford and Shearin 1994: 18).

This last point is also emphasized by *instrumentality theories*. These explore the relationship between the effort an individual is prepared to make and the reward he or she expects for having made that effort. According to these theories, an individual will only engage in a task if the experience or outcome is likely to be judged as personally meaningful or satisfying. Oxford and Shearin report findings from industrial psychologists Locke and Latham (1990), whose years of research have revealed that goal-setting plays a crucial role in the individual's evaluation of achievement and their subsequent perseverance or disillusionment. Locke and Latham found that clearly identified, challenging goals yield higher performances than easy or vague goals. Most importantly, Locke and Latham also state that the individual's commitment to pursuing an assigned (i.e. externally set) goal is as firm as a goal set by the individual himself or herself — provided the goal is accepted as meaningful and valuable. The researchers reiterate the importance of feedback as stressed in general psychology theories.

In view of the widely acknowledged positive effects of intrinsic motivation (cf. Deci and Ryan 1985, 1992 and Ushioda 1996), there can be little doubt that educators would ideally like their

students to be driven by this particular motivational force: intrinsic motivation makes individuals experience learning in a manner which is personally enriching and academically satisfying by helping to sustain the effort and persistence needed for high achievement, as well as leading to greater self-esteem and confidence. However, in the less ideal environment of institutionalized L2 learning with a high degree of what Deci and Ryan (1992: 23) call 'controlling input', and with considerable emphasis on the attainment of externally-set goals and standards as measured in results, students' diverse interests are not of sole concern. Although they can and should be taken into account, in particular with regard to foreign language learning with its multiple opportunities for engaging in the subject matter, there will more than likely be aspects which students will resist involving themselves in voluntarily. Grammar learning is widely regarded as being among those aspects. Thus, while every conceivable effort must be undertaken in order to foster an inherently interesting learning environment overall, as regards the acquisition of L2 grammar, the more modest aim of helping students to identify with the grammar task, i.e. to internalize an externally-set objective which they discover as being of relevance, if not necessarily of interest, to their language learning experience and progress, might stand a more realistic chance of achievement.

The issue of attitudes with specific regard to L2 grammar learning has been investigated by Zimmermann (1995). He distinguishes between *affective* and *cognitive* attitudes towards learning. 'Affective attitude' denotes a learner's emotional involvement with a given subject matter, while 'cognitive attitude' denotes rational considerations. Zimmermann points out that many students' attitude towards grammar learning is inconsistent, as they display simultaneously a negative affective and a positive cognitive attitude. Thus, a student might well admit that he or she dislikes grammar, while at the same time acknowledging the necessity of possessing a sound grammatical knowledge for the purpose of genuine language proficiency.

Finally, one aspect whose importance has been increasingly stressed is the role of teacher attributes (cf. Rösler 1992, 1994 and Dörnyei and Csizér 1998). Researchers agree that a teacher's personality, expertise, and commitment are crucially important factors as regards sustaining learner motivation.

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Subjects and course structure

Subjects taking part in the research were 69 first-year DCU students who were enrolled in one of the following degree courses: Applied Languages (AL), International Marketing and Languages (IML), and International Business and Languages (IBL). All subjects had studied German for five years at school, at the end of which they sat the Leaving Certificate examinations.

A total of five hours per week is allocated to the German language module for students with Leaving Certificate German. Three out of those five hours are contact hours and the remaining two are used for preparation and follow-up work as well as independent study. One of the three classroom hours is dedicated to the discussion of grammar issues and written work, with the other two dedicated to oral, listening, and reading skills as well as civilization.

There are two strands to the DCU grammar programme. Strand One constitutes the common core grammar class which provides students with the structure and orientation identified as crucial in the learning process. Strand Two comprises the individualized programme which recognizes that students differ in their knowledge and performance levels as well as their preference for learning styles. While their particular preference may not be matched by the teaching style in the classroom, outside the classroom context they are encouraged to explore the style with which they feel most comfortable and focus on points which are of particular relevance to them. Taking into account research findings regarding students' background as well as previously established knowledge and performance levels on entry into university, the first-year grammar syllabus is to a large extent remedial in nature in that it includes even fairly basic aspects of the verb phrase which would have been touched upon at second level.

While exposing students to formal instruction in a dedicated grammar class was considered to be the most appropriate forum in which to pursue the aims of the grammar programme in DCU, grammar awareness obviously needs to extend beyond the boundaries of the grammar class and transcend into all receptive and productive uses of German. Constant cross-referencing between the grammar class and other classes was therefore essential if learners were to realize that grammar is an integral part of the communication process, not an optional extra.

In Strand One of the programme, students were, at the beginning of the academic year, provided with a list of the items which were to form the basis for the teaching and examination syllabus. They were also informed about examination procedures and marking criteria. All classes were interactive and students were encouraged to ask as many questions as they liked. Grammar classes were conducted primarily in English, in line with the preference expressed by students in a diagnostic survey (see below). Students were provided with opportunities for regular practice of their grammatical knowledge in written and oral work as well as being reminded of the need to apply that knowledge outside the classroom context.

In Strand Two of the programme, teachers and students drew up individual learner profiles in mutual consultation. In Week One of the semester, a diagnostic survey was conducted for the purpose of investigating language-learning backgrounds as well as linguistic competence levels. This test was to serve the purpose of identifying strengths and weaknesses of individual members of that group. Findings were discussed in one-to-one interviews between teacher and student in Week Two. At the end of the interview, students were asked to select and note down three skill-related tasks and three-grammar related tasks on which they were to focus in the course of the year. A copy of the 'contract' was kept by both the student and the teacher. Students were informed that progress in the defined areas was to be an assessment criterion in borderline cases at the end of the year.

Data collection

Two cross-sectional sets of investigations were conducted in order to establish the effect the grammar programme had on selected acquisitional aspects such as levels of motivation, confidence, learner responsibility, strategy use, and linguistic or metalinguistic knowledge. One set was conducted at the beginning of Semester One, and the other at the end of Semester Two. Both qualitative and quantitative elicitation instruments were employed. Questionnaires were distributed to all 69 learners with the primary aim of eliciting quantifiable data from the largest possible number of subjects. However, since a deeper insight into some of the aspects under investigation was considered crucial, one-to-one interviews were

subsequently conducted where open-ended questions arising out of the answers given in the questionnaires were put to 25 out of the 69 learners. For the interviews, a proportional number of students from each degree course were selected on the basis of the results displayed in the diagnostic test conducted in Week One. Care was taken to include a wide range of learner profiles, e.g. those with weak, average, and strong test performances, extrovert and introvert learners, learners expressing a like or dislike of grammar learning, etc. Due to space constraints, data collected with regard to linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge levels will not be considered in this paper. Only data with regard to motivational aspects of language learning will be discussed (see Appendices A and B for sample questionnaires).

Results

In order to ascertain overall language-learning motivation, all students were asked if they liked learning German. Some 97% confirmed that they did, with the vast majority (77%) quoting intrinsic interests such as enjoying to be able to communicate in the foreign language, learning about cultural aspects, etc.

Students were also asked to state which aspects of language learning they enjoyed and which ones they did not enjoy. Results showed that accuracy and grammar were aspects which were enjoyed by less than 30% of learners, making these the least popular aspects of language learning. Students were invited to make any comments they wished in relation to this question. The perceived difficult nature of German grammar, the lack of grammar exposure at second level, and the inadequacy of grammar explanations were all mentioned in this connection. In another part of the questionnaire, students were asked to state if they find German grammar interesting. Again, only 29% indicated that this was the case.

Those interviewed were asked to elaborate on their grammar learning experiences at school. Results for all learners indicate that learning was geared above all towards the requirements of the Leaving Certificate examination, which consist of a very limited number of grammar concepts, focusing primarily on the verb phrase. Rote-learning of unanalysed chunks of text which were considered useful for certain sections of the Leaving Certificate examination appears to have been greatly encouraged. According to

students, free-style written output was largely constructed with the help of set phrases which had been learnt off by heart, confirming the predominance of a memory-based approach to language learning at school level (cf. Skehan 1994). Some 62% of those interviewed referred to the kind of instruction they had received as 'patchy', stating that they found it difficult to detect the rationale and meaning behind the tables they were given to learn off by heart (cf. Metcalfe et al. 1998 for similar results). Some learners added that although they had not grasped the grammar system at all, they had nevertheless managed to achieve good results in the examination. As one student put it, 'you can wing the Leaving Cert[ificate] without having a clue about grammar: all you need to do is learn a few nice phrases for the oral and the essay [and] be good at guessing for the reading comprehension'.

Those interviewed were also asked what role they believed grammar played in the overall language-learning process. Results show that the majority of learners (64%) do not view grammar as an integral part of the language. One student's comments are representative of many others made in this regard: the student saw no apparent contradiction in stating that 'my German is really okay — it's just my grammar that's dodgy'. This would confirm anecdotal evidence that many learners view 'general language skills' as separate from 'grammatical abilities'. That this view does not negate the importance of grammatical knowledge as such, and that students hold the belief that grammar must be important in some instances, was demonstrated in the questionnaire when 91% of students disagreed with the statement 'I do not want to learn grammar, I just want to be able to communicate in German'. When asked in the interviews what rationale they saw behind the acquisition of grammatical knowledge, 86% confirmed that they considered its main purpose as contributing to high levels of accuracy. Only 10% pointed out that grammar was important for efficient and fluent communication. Accuracy was thus clearly regarded as a goal in itself and not as an essential component of all-round communicative competence. Thus, while students would appear to display a positive cognitive attitude towards grammar learning and usage, in practice they failed to see the ultimate rationale behind it.

In the questionnaire, students were also asked which aspects of language learning they felt confident about, and which areas they felt required a special effort on their part. Results show that grammar is one of the two least confidence-inspiring aspects, with 64%

of learners stating that they did not feel confident about their grammatical knowledge and application.

To sum up:

(a) The vast majority of students in the present student cohort displayed a negative affective attitude towards German grammar acquisition and application.

(b) Although students' cognitive attitude appeared positive, the interviews established that students failed to see the ultimate rationale behind the role of grammar in the overall language acquisition process and in language usage, i.e., they did not view grammar as an integral part of language.

(c) Confidence levels with regard to grammar and accuracy were fairly low.

Results for the end of Semester Two revealed that there were virtually no changes as regards students' affective attitude: the vast majority of learners (69%) continued to have little or no intrinsic interest in grammar acquisition.

However, an important change took place with regard to a recognition of the importance of grammar in all instances of receptive and productive language use, with 73% of learners stating (convincingly) that functional language use should not be divorced from structural language use. The importance of grammar for high fluency levels was specifically mentioned by slightly more than half of the students. Thus, students' positive cognitive attitudes became more meaningful in that more learners appeared clearer as to the actual purpose of grammatical knowledge. One student's quote sums up similar statements from other students: 'At school, it felt like grammar was done just to get you by in an exam but ... now I feel like it's there to broaden your understanding and fluency in a language'. Learners would thus appear to have taken on board the view that if they want to become good at a language, they cannot do so without becoming good at grammar, irrespective of their lexical and pragmatic repertoire and abilities. The internalization and integration of this externally-set goal into the students' own value system was considered as crucially important for task persistence.

Turning to the issue of confidence, the need for psychological security was also stressed as being significant if learners are to persist at a given task. Students were therefore asked to indicate how

confident they felt about their overall grammatical knowledge levels at the end of Year One. While at the beginning of the year 64% of learners had indicated they were definitely not confident, this number went down to 10% at the end. Some 62% stated that they had gained in confidence compared to the beginning of the year. The overall increase in confidence levels established in this question was confirmed in other questions, where this aspect was continuously stressed as one of the most beneficial effects of the entire language programme. It could, of course, be argued that any grammar instruction will inevitably result in increased confidence levels since presumably at least some matters will become clearer to at least some students. However, experience in previous years, when there was no dedicated grammar class and grammar issues were dealt with on an ad hoc basis in the language class, has shown that this is not necessarily the case.

When asked if they had found the grammar class mainly helpful or mainly unhelpful, 96% stated they had found it helpful and 4% indicated they had not. As an examination of student answers showed, the primary beneficial effect of the class with regard to the acquisition of rule knowledge was not so much that learners' declarative knowledge had been extended (although it had) but that they had grasped the rationale behind rules, thus allowing them to apply these rules in an analytical and structured manner in their language use. Thus, the single most important benefit would seem to have been the clarification of fuzzy notions in the course of the grammar classes. Some 13% of students commented on the perceived helpfulness of the grammar programme with regard to creating equal opportunities for all learners in the pursuit of set performance standards. As one student put it: 'Some people did grammar at school, others didn't, so when the lecturer explains things in class, you know that at least everybody get the same grammar teaching. Everybody gets a fair chance. What you do with that information is up to you'.

The most frequently-named negative aspect of the programme was the lack of in-class practice. This was a clear indication (confirmed in other answers) that a majority of students (64%) had not sufficiently taken on board the concept of using their independent learning time for practice purposes. Strand One of the programme (i.e. the common core element) thus clearly won out over Strand Two (the individualization element), whereas they had been designed to complement each other. When asked in a final question

what recommendations students had for the course designers, 79% endorsed the course in its existing form while the rest suggested various changes, with increased in-class practice topping the list.

To sum up, the vast majority of students appear to have perceived most aspects regarding the content and implementation of the grammar programme as mainly helpful, while a small minority (4%) was either unhappy with certain elements or with the class in general. Students stressed repeatedly that the assistance received on a cognitive and metacognitive level had a positive knock-on effect on another aspect which was considered to be of crucial importance, the building up of confidence levels.

Conclusions

The first-year German language programme as discussed above, and in particular the grammar classes, would appear to have contributed positively to the transition from second to third level on a cognitive-motivational level as well as in terms of confidence building. Other research results not reported in this paper revealed a clear correlation between metalinguistic and linguistic knowledge levels on the one hand and accuracy levels in written production on the other. Both sets of results lend support to those theories in Second Language Acquisition which attribute a vital role to explicit grammar teaching and learning.

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