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SELF-DIRECTED GRAMMAR LEARNING: -ING FORMS

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In dieser Studienreihe veröffentlicht das IFF, Arbeitsgruppe "PFL/Schulinnovationen", Ergebnisse von Forschungs- und Entwicklungsarbeiten von Lehrerinnen und Lehrern, um sie einer breiteren Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen.

Contents

1. Introduction

This project arose as the result of thoughts about autonomy and foreign langugage learning inspired by Riley's book 'Discourse and Learning' (1985). The English book forming the basis of my teaching is number 4 of Kacowsky's 'Ann and Pat' series. Although I usually try to enliven the rather traditionally presented grammar points with various activities, I have to admit that this merely concerns the practice and transfer phase and that these activities were not used in the actual rule learning phase. Although grammar points have been contextualised, the exploration of rules is basically teacher or textbook induced.

There was originally a growing concern on my part as to the extent to which the learning process is affected by teaching. Classroom observation, concept-questioning and the checking of written and oral tasks made me feel that even though rules had been taught carefully, and to the best of my knowledge methodologically appropriately, they had only been partially put into practice by the pupils. I attributed this fact to two main causes. (I am fully aware that this is simplifying matters, but for practical reasons I feel I cannot go into areas of inter/learner language, variability, sequence of development etc.)

Firstly, presentation of rules by the teacher/book prevents authentic learning which is marked by the establishment of hypotheses and their subsequent adaptation, adoption or rejection. Secondly, this prevention of personalised rule learning may even slow down acquisition, that is to say, that teaching MIGHT even impede actual rule learning (acquisition).

Given the fact that up to now we have not been able to look into the black box, we as teachers are not able to determine how much of our input has become intake. So my hypothesis was that the formulation of rules carried out by the learner in a more or less self-directed way as opposed to exclusive direction from external sources would lead to a more personally adequate, hence more comprehensible, even if sometimes "merely" intuitive, understanding of the rule to be learned. My intention was to let learners find for themselves, via guided tasks, certain facts about the way a given grammatical rule works.

When I tried to realize my ideas, I immediately encountered a number of problems.
1) My starting point was a fourth form. So the first question was "Which structure is particularly suitable for self-directed learning at this stage?"
2) Should I use authenic texts or artificial ones?
3) How much of the grammatical area had to be covered?
4) Do the chosen syntactic structures have clear, recognisable meanings?
5) What analytical capabilities and grammatical pre-knowledge, can be expected from my

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learners? (A particularly difficult question as I was forced to recognize a few times in the course of the project.

After careful consideration I decided to choose the progressive aspect, the main reason being, firstly, that it was on the fourth form's syllabus and, secondly, that it had appeared to be one of the constant "troublemakers" throughout the year. Having made up my mind about the grammatical area, points 2, 3, 4 appeared to assume rather threatening dimensions.

1.1. To choose or not to choose an authentic text

Intuitively I opted for authentic texts. From a teaching point of view they seemed to offer some advantages.

1) The choice of texts is greater. Knowing my class I could use texts geared to areas of personal interest.

2) The examples in an authentic context would be far more realistic in semantic and discourse terms.

3) A piecemeal approach, as practised in our textbook would be avoided, that is to say, my intention was to present as realistic a picture as possible.

This last idea was later to become a crucial point, which led to some substantial changes within the project. I therefore feel obliged to stress this point in order to make clear changes I made to my original starting point (progressive aspect!). Let us consider briefly some of the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

The piecemeal approach usually adopted in most textbooks covers different grammar (or functional/notional) points one by one in separate units. Each unit is often quite unrelated to the others. Additionally, grammar points are treated as separate entities which have no recognisable relationship with each other. Although this is often done in order to simplify matters for the learner and so seemingly makes learning easier for them, I believe that, in the long run, it does more harm than good.

Why should this be so? In order to maintain this pseudo-simplicity we have to either control input very carefully or to put together a variable exceptions catalogue.

Returning to my project, this would mean that I wanted to analyse as many different forms as the text required. In concrete terms this meant that whereas at the preliminary stage of this project I had had in mind 'only' the progressive aspect, I had to now, after looking through possible texts, go beyond the "progressiveness" level in order to sensitize learners to the fact that -ing forms included a lot more than just the aspectual function.

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2. The Project

The main linguistic aim of the following project was:

- to sensitize learners to the existence of several syntactically and semantically different -ing forms. Consequently, learners should be able to distinguish between basic syntactical differences and their general meanings,

and as a long term effect:

- to make learners realize that grammar awareness is possible, that is, that looking for rules can be carried out even by linguistically 'naive' learners and that this process eventually leads to a better understanding of the language.

The pedagogical aim was:

- to let learners experience real learning by making and testing hypotheses. By using their own intuition learners would finally become better managers of their own learning.

The text "Could your child be the school bully" was introduced by means of a number of pre-reading and key-concept-finding activities. As the class is a fourth form and the linguistic level of the text was somewhat above the learners present level, it was necessary to spend quite a lot of time making it as comprehensible as possible. This was also necessary in order to relieve a certain amount of anxiety which could be expected to come up as learners had never worked with an authentic text of comparable length before. Describing these activities would, however, exceed the scope of this paper.

2.1. The Grammar Part

Step 1   Having become acquainted with the text the learners had to underline and number in pencil ALL the -ing forms they found in the text. This was first to be tried individually then pupils compared results with their neighbours. Interestingly, results varied from about 20 to the actual number 54.

Step 2   Then they had to underline words next to the respective -ing forms which they felt belonged to the form (example given). This was supposed to help them to become aware of auxiliary forms and prepositions forming a syntactical unit with the -ing forms.

Step 3   Step 3 started a critical stage. Learners were now really trying out their analyzing capabilities. The task was: Sort all your examples into 3 groups according to the headings below.

3.1. Words ending in -ing which are used as a verb e.g. "She was playing tennis".

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3.2. Words ending in -ing which are used as a noun e.g. "Playing tennis is fun".

3.3. Other words ending in -ing e.g. "something".

This was again first tried alone, then in pair- or groupwork as personal need arose. The language spoken was German.

My impressions while I was walking about in the classroom during the first step were that all learners tried very hard. Subsequent steps generated some frustration as some were obviously not capable of seeing or determining any differences. When comparing results on the board, learners expressed a definite hierarchy of difficulties:

3.3. finding other words was adjuged to be relatively easy,

3.1. was experienced as not too difficult as far as -ing forms in the basic sentence went. However, there was some controversy, about what constituted a noun or part of a complex sentence. (Present participles "Coping with a child who is the victim ...")

The students' feelings of uncertainty were mixed with some anxiety as, unfortunately, the first 'Schularbeit' was drawing nearer. Although I tried to make clear that I did not except them to do sorting exercises such as the ones above as a test item, I could still sense that some learners were nervous. I therefore felt obliged to explain the basic difference between a 'complex' and a 'basic' sentence on the board. Given more time, I now think, this would have been manageable, without major problems, on an autonomous learning basis.

Another problem which came up then was that analytically less gifted learners tended to copy the examples of the more successful learners often without knowing why. This seems at present to be one of the weaker points of self-directed learning (though only within our institutional context?). and raises the following question: "How can we bridge the gap between task difficulty and personal learning and expectations, regardless of whether they are self- or externally induced?" Or in other words, "How can we make clear to learners that the learning process is as important as the result and at the same time reduce tensions for those who are still in the process of learning?"

Step 4   Having introduced the concept of basic and complex sentences learners were asked to sort 3.1. VERB examples into *1. Basic Sentences* and *2. Complex Sentences*.

Step 5   Having accomplished this they were told to sort *1. Basic Sentences* into 4 groups according to the verb's tense form.

Step 6   Next they got an "-ing" sheet of paper, which for want of a better word was called an -ing mind map. They had to fill in all the examples already analyzed. The next task was to draw a time line for each *Basic sentence* group using NOW as a

reference point. Again they were allowed to cooperate with their neighbours. The time-lines were then discussed on the board.

Step 7 They then had to sort *Complex Sentences* into 4 groups. Headings and the suggestion "Think about what the sentences may have looked like if they had not been shortened" were provided. I felt that in these particular circumstances this had to be done even though I was revealing a part of the thinking process.

Step 8 We then turned to NOUN (Gerund) forms and learners had to sort examples into 3 groups. Suggestion: "Think about their position in the sentence. Which -ing forms are preceded by prepositions?"

They were given mind map 2 (Noun, Gerund forms) then and they had to fill in the correctly sorted examples. Then together we filled in together the 3 remaining examples under the heading: VERBS + (VERB + -ING FORM). This area will be treated in the near future.

This ended the analyzing or grammatical awareness stage and we then did various practice sheets whose main aim was to check whether learners could use -ing forms appropriately, and which was supposed to give the learners the feeling that all their previous analyzing could be put to more practical use. Even now the mind maps, however, are still being used whenever -ing forms come up in their workbooks and learners are asked if examples fit under any of their established headings.

3. Evaluation

The project was followed by a more or less open questionnaire which had to be answered anonymously at home. For a summary of questionnaire results see appendix.

Before explaining the results in more detail, I think it is necessary to stress once more that learners were being faced with this kind of awareness raising for the first time and, secondly, that sensitisation is a process whose results cannot be seen clearly while the process is still under way. This may account for the fact that learners cannot yet know or judge how useful the tasks were they had to carry out.

3.1. Perceived difficulty:

A: On the whole, sorting exercises were seen as difficult, particularly on complex sentences. Criticism might be summed up by one quotation, "Die meisten Schwierigkeiten ... habe

ich beim Zuordnen der Wörter gehabt. Es war sehr schwierig herauszufinden, welches Wort in welche Spalte gehörte, z. B. ist dieses Wort Nomen oder Verb. Dann stellte sich noch die Frage, welche Art von Nomen oder Verb es ist. Dies war wirklich sehr verwirrend."

I think that this feeling of confusion is natural given the complexity of the project. Unfortunately, unlike native children, who must experience the same feeling when confronted with the same enormous load of linguistic input, our learners did not have the amount of time and data available to process input sufficiently and carefully enough. On top of this, the first written test was due and students feared that they would be evaluated on the basis of similar tasks, fears which were, of course, completely unjustified. There was, however, some real time pressure on my part, as I was running short of material for the coming test. This might have led to some pushing or short-cuts especially at the end of the project.

B: Practice sheets were seen as comparatively easy. Surprisingly, learners did not experience greater difficulties in applying their 'knowledge' in what I would call restricted situations, namely: transformation exercises or written exercises with a clear stimulus. This impression was backed up by the test results which showed no difficulties for most of the learners in tasks similar to those on the practice sheets. I would stress that this was unexpected as, after all, a wide area of different grammatical aspects had been covered on the practice sheets. Although, on the other hand, forms were elicited in rather restricted situations.

3.2. Perceived learning:

Quite a large number of the learners had the impression that they had learned 'something'. While most of them were not able to specify what exactly they thought they had learned, they assumed that their successful completion of the practice sheets would have to be due to some learning process. This impression is mirrored in statements like: "(weil) ich mich bei den Übungszetteln ausgekannt habe; teilweise, weil ich keine Probleme bei den Übungszetteln hatte."

Other learners were surprised about the different number of - ing forms and expressed an increased awareness towards -ing forms:

- "ich jetzt weiß, daß es soviele Arten der -ing form gibt"
- "weil im Englischen doch mehrere Wörter mit -ing enden"

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- "besseres Gefühl für die -ing forms habe. Beim Lesen wird man auf -ing Wörter aufmerksam"

Others thought they had learned something because of "good -easy" explanations. Whereas in actual fact explanation on my part had been very limited and usually offered only as a repetition or re-phrasing of learner utterances.

3.3. Perceived non-learning:

There was also quite a large number of people who were not certain whether they had learned anything at all. Criticism was expressed that explanations were insufficient or too complicated (see also above!):

- "es ist viel zu umständlich erklärt worden"

- "es sehr verwirrend erklärt wurde"

or because of specific or general comprehension problems:

- "Weil ich die beiden anderen Zetteln nicht verstanden habe; bei den Zuordnungszetteln nicht ausgekannt habe"

- "weil das ganze Projekt ziemlich verwirrend war"

- "so etwas einfach noch zu schwierig ist"

How can these data now be interpreted? Firstly, there was some amount of cross-marking, which indicates that some learners did not seem to be certain whether they had or had not learned anything. Secondly, without wanting to make excuses, I genuinely felt that a certain amount of confusion was to be expected as a natural consequence of the complexity of the grammatical area. Consequently, it could be argued that increased input over a longer period would certainly lead to a decrease in confusion. Nevertheless there is again a grain of truth in one of the learner's statements when s/he says that: "so etwas einfach noch zu schwierig war für (uns) mich." I obviously stumbled over one of the eternal pedagogic fallacies, 'Simplicity for the teacher equals simplicity for the learner!' Although this was one of the points I consciously tried to avoid by choosing the self-directed learning way it must -via some external/internal constraints - have come in again. In future projects I will have to carefully consider ways of avoiding confusion because of complex input. However, I want to emphasize again that, in my opinion, it is not the complexity of the input (grammatical area) which is the real problem, but what the learner has to do with it and how they have to process it.

3.4. Interest in similar projects:

Again the result was surprising as only one learner firmly rejected the idea of a similar project in the future. In short, an overwhelming majority expressed a "yes-but" attitude. Seven learners found that lack of time had been a major source of irritation and thus would have liked more time available for the project.

- "mehr Zeit zur Verfügung stünde; man sich genügend Zeit nimmt; aber zu kurz"

Another relatively large group (5) would prefer smaller and more transparent units:

- "in kleine Untertitel, nicht alles in allem; überschaubarer; wenn nicht soviele -ing Wörter auf dem Zettel sind; klein angefangen wird".

3.5. Assessment of project length:

The wish for more time expressed in point 3.4. strikingly contrasts with the high number of "zu lange". A tentative explanation will be offered later on.

4. Conclusion

It is difficult for me to see the project in terms of being either successful or unsuccessful as the method of self-directed learning is difficult to evaluate. The severe time constraints imposed on this project further complicate assessment.

Nevertheless, I will try to consider the question "How can linguistic success be measured?" This would certainly need long term guided interviewing to elicit learnt structures. Apart from not having the necessary time there is still the crucial question, "When can correct results realistically be expected?" That is, I feel, that a structure taught/learnt needs some time to settle in and immediate response seems to impede correct production. (See: Krashen, Asher's 'silent period')

> "However the structure of the classroom and classroom activities designed to develop TL (Target language) performance and requiring immediate production from learners can result in heavy reliance on routines and patterns, blocking for a time learners' processess of IL (Interlanguage) construction and development, including the ability to treat language as a means of communication for negotiating meaning." (Weinert 1987:90)

If this proves to be correct it should have some serious consequences for our way of teaching, most notably for error correction and marking.

I could, however, see some tentative approximation of the learner language to target rules in

subsequent more open tasks. I would like to give a few examples taken from tasks written within about a week of the project where no -ing production was prescribed.

- if that is being jealous of a sister ...
- you ought to spend much time talking with your son ...
- Have you ever thought about talking...
- you can earn a lot of money with playing a ...
- At the end of your jogging you can go to a pub without knowing your wife ...

The second important question concerns pedagogical matters: "Has this method of learning aspects of the English language been pedagogically successful?"

In order to define more clearly what is implied by this question I will have to ask several further questions to which a positive answer would, in my opinion, demonstrate pedagogical success in this area.

1) Did activities provide a cognitive challenge?

2) Was interest sustained throughout the project? Or, was learning exciting enough to keep up motivation?

3) Did learners experience their learning as successful?

4) Did learners prefer this way of learning?

Before I go on to analyze the above questions using available data and observations I have to admit that the question of what constitutes pedagogical success for me (in this project) was not as precisely formulated at the beginning of the project as it is now. This has, I feel, some definite negative repercussions concerning the data in this paper, because the questionnaire should have included questions eliciting data to the questions above. In particular questions 1 and 4 were only vaguely touched upon. Consequently I can only discuss personal classroom observation there.

Question 1: Activities were cognitively challenging, in fact, for some learners they were too challenging. See point 1 A on the questionnaire. The range of variation of cognitive challenge deserves some attention. Some learners experienced almost no problems at all:

- "Die Einteilung ... war sehr leicht."

Whilst others faced great difficulties:

- "leider habe ich bei dem ganzen Projekt Schwierigkeiten gehabt, da für mich alles sehr verwirrend war."

An immediate practical solution to tackle this problem would include more differentiation through a combination of traditional teaching/presenting rules and self-directed rule learning.

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Practically speaking, the learner should have some opportunity to escape guided learning if the need arises and turn toward 'safer' ground. By this I mean, for example, hints where he could look up the point in question or an additional sheet with the rule plus explanations or more self-explanatory input. This sort of input should only be possible via the teacher, which would prevent shortcuts being taken too early. Although it may sound trivial, one of the problems of self-directed learning is the preparation and timing of the input, that is to say, the teacher must anticipate roughly in which directions learners' hypothesising might go, and with which difficulties they may be confronted.

Question 2: Some considerable amount of excitement was aroused, in particular at the beginning due to the different way of teaching and later through the successful completion of exercises. Excitement waned quickly for those who experienced some frustration through unsuccessful completion of tasks. I noticed that learners who began to oppose the project, quickly became absorbed in it again when we started something new. I recall in particular one learner who came up during a break complaining bitterly about the difficulty of the exercises. Next class when we did sorting exercises accompanied by practical application I heard a loud "das ist ja eh nicht so schwer". From then on her participation increased tremendously.

Having said this, I do, however, feel that the whole project in this form was too long (about 9 hours plus reading comprehension). Interest in a grammar project cannot be sustained over such a long period if it is not mixed with other activities. It would perhaps have been better to split up classes into different groups with emphasis on different language aspects or skills. Furthermore, grammatical analysis should have been accompanied by immediate practical application of some kind. One possible side-effect, apart from maintaining motivation, would be more adequately-tuned input. This also explains for me the seeming contradiction between the learners' desire for more time (see questionnaire 1.A and 4) and their feeling that the project had been too long. Future projects will have to be prepared accordingly.

Question 3: Especially during the practice phase learners experienced success. It must, however, again be stressed that the development of learning for some learners did not correspond to the progression which the learning programme attempted to impose. This, inevitably, led to some frustration.

Question 4: This question might be tentatively answered with 'yes', because of the high number of questionnaire point 4 "ja, aber .. "-answers. One learner explicitly mentioned his/her preference:

"Ja, weil es mich sehr interessierte und ich glaube, daß das besser ist als daß ein Prof. seinen Text herunterließt und dann muß man es können."

Nevertheless, whether this project was successful in pedagogical terms cannot be answered conclusively with the existing data.

5. Summary

Summarizing, it must be said that the project did not offer any conclusive answers or insights as to whether rule formulation was accelerated or became more 'personalized'. Thus the question whether grammar teaching or self-directed rule learning is more efficient or successful was not answered by this project. The big issues remain unanswered, though not untouched. I personally feel that learners through their own searching and analyzing were quite amazed at being able to work out some system, albeit of a rather rough nature, in a field of high grammatical complexity. Furthermore, I am certain that future projects of this kind, by avoiding teething troubles as indicated above, will prove more conclusively that classroom learning is an individualised business whose effectiveness can be maximised by means of (more) self-directed learning.

What can be rather safely said about the whole project is:

1) Learners have become sensitized to a large number of grammatically and functionally different -ing forms.

2) Learners have successfully put into practice these forms in fairly narrow tasks.

3) Some learners have already begun to use several forms in more open tasks. (Absolute semantic/syntactic correctness is not the point at issue here, as usage is one great step further than avoidance or ignorance).

4) Learners have become acquainted with a new way of learning grammar which relies heavily upon their own judgements and hypotheses.

5) Although the idea of success in linguistic or pedagogic terms is difficult to define, learners seem on the whole to have reacted favourably to the project.

6) The pace of the learning programme and more topic/skill variety must be considered extremely carefully in future projects as both these factors aroused some criticism and are decisive factors in sustaining motivation throughout a longer grammatical project.

7) Reflecting on this project was, for me, almost as important as the actual project itself and has provided me with a number of valuable insights for future projects of this kind in particular and for language teaching in general.

Appendix

Form: 4 th

Number of learners: 26

Length of project: ca. 10 lessons

Materials: 1 text, 2 mindmaps, 3 practice sheets, 1 evaluation questionnaire.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire was split up into an easier - difficult section.

1 A: Schwierig

- Einordnen	17
Einordnen: complex sentences:	5
noun	2
- Zeit: zu schnell	3
- alles sehr verwirrend	1
	21 (out of 21)

1 B: Leichter

- Übungszettel	5
- Einordnen	4
nouns: 3	
basic sentence: 1	
	9 (out of 21)

2) Ich glaube, daß ich etwas gelernt habe, weil ...   14 (of 20)

3) Ich denke, daß ich nichts gelernt habe, weil ...   9 (of 20)

4) Ich würde so etwas gerne nocheinmal machen: 1) Ja   2

    2) Ja, aber   17

    3) Nein   1

5) Das ganze Projekt war: zu lang: 14

    Richtig: 4

    zu kurz: 1

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