

DIETMAR RÖSLER

THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT OF A UNIVERSITY GERMAN DEGREE COURSE

Die Rolle der Grammatik im Fremdsprachenunterricht auf der Universitätsebene kann nicht allgemeinen methodischen Prinzipien entnommen werden. Eine Analyse der konkreten Lernziele, Lerner- und Lehrervariablen usw. muß bestimmen, welche grammatischen Elemente wie beschrieben und wann und auf welche Art vermittelt werden. Der universitäre Bereich wird dabei oft „antizyklisch“ zu den herrschenden Vorstellungen in der Schule vorgehen müssen. Je nach gewählten Arbeits- und Sozialformen wird der Umgang mit Korrekturen sich unterscheiden; so weit wie möglich sollte Grammatik im Fremdsprachenunterricht als bedeutsam erfahren werden. Vier verschiedene Möglichkeiten der Platzierung von Grammatik im Fortgeschrittenen-Unterricht an der Universität werden diskutiert: Sprachbau als linguistischer Gegenstand; spezieller Grammatikunterricht für Fortgeschrittene; integrierte Kurse mit unrissemem Grammatikteil; keine gesonderte Bedeutung der Grammatik.

The role of grammar does not depend on a belief in a global method ...

Discussions about the role of grammar in a British or Irish university degree course are, in as far as they take place at all, often anecdotal (cf. e.g. LOFMARK 1990) or else concerned with teaching methods (cf. e.g. WOODS 1990). The debate about language teaching at secondary level is more heated but also has a strong emphasis on methods. This is unfortunate as attempts to answer the question „Which method is the best for foreign language learning?“ on a general level are bound to be unsatisfactory, this discussion only being productive for those who are selling hardware to go with specific methods, those who have an interest in linking their names with a particular method to advance themselves in the academic market or for publishers with textbooks to sell which are bound to a clearly marketable method.

Arguments like the ones which claim: „The shortcomings of the grammar-translation-method were overcome by the direct method whose shortcomings in turn were overcome by the audio-lingual one, followed by the communica-

tive method, the alternative and the intercultural methods and so on" are not simply naive in the manner in which they ignore the fact that the multitude of factors influencing foreign language learning does not lend itself to this type of simplified treatment, they are also positively dangerous, as such dichotomic thinking leads to teaching behaviour which, in following the latest craze, ends up providing certain groups of students with woefully inadequate language instruction.

To refer to methods governing language learning as „paradigms“, as is often done, is not only an insult to KUHN's epistemological concept of paradigms which was, after all, concerned with changing insights of a more fundamental nature than those about previously neglected aspects of language learning which now become the governing ones. It is also one of the main reasons why research into foreign language learning and teaching is circular rather than progressive. Nobody would ever start an argument as to whether, as such, a seven iron is better than a sand wedge, one simply selects whatever club is appropriate for whatever particular predicament one finds oneself in on the golf course. Why, then, should it generally be thought that the advantages of one method over the other can be discussed in universal terms with only very general references to the learners and situations in question?¹

... but on a careful analysis of the given situation

Decisions, therefore, about the appropriate kind of language teaching upon which the definition of the role of grammar is based, must depend solely on a proper analysis of the given situation: the people involved – learners and teachers –, their interaction, the institution – with its special conditions such as exams – in which the learning is taking place, the attitudes towards the target language and culture etc. How grammar is taught, what level of correctness is striven for, which aspects of the grammatical system have to be learnt for particular skills only and which have to be learnt for all skills, how much or how little linguistic

¹ The reader might forgive my dealing with this topic in a slightly flippant manner, but as every resurrection of an old method in new clothes and every supposedly genuinely new method seems to be blissfully ignorant about what has gone on previously in language learning, it is difficult to sustain one's patience. I have undertaken more serious attempts to show the untenability of dichotomic methodological discussions: RÖSLER (1977) on audiolingual vs. cognitive, RÖSLER (1983) on communicative vs. grammar, and in RÖSLER (1989) I stress that there is no such thing as an intercultural approach which could be pitted against other methods. For a general criticism of global methods cf. ZÖFGEN (1987), for a discussion of the role of grammar within a communicative framework cf. HELBIG (1991).

terminology (and which one) is used during the learning and teaching, how much formal teaching and how much discovery learning is appropriate etc. – these questions can be answered successfully if, and only if, they are answered in relation to specific groups of learners and their teachers, targets and institutions. Any attempt to answer the question „What is the role of grammar in a language curriculum?“, if it is not posed as part of a sales talk but rather in an academic discussion must, therefore, begin with „It depends ...“.

What may be appropriate today could have been superfluous a few years ago and vice versa. An intensive language happening is offered to first year students of German at King's College London on the first three days of their course. For three days they communicate only in German, getting to know each other, exploring the department and the university, watching satellite television, listening to German music etc. Three days of speaking and listening, which, in addition to the hidden aims of social integration and group formation, had the original aim of trying to convince A-level students who had had an overdose of grammar, translation and literature that they could express themselves freely in German without having to be afraid of making mistakes because, for these three days at least, nobody corrected them. We continue to offer this „happening“, mainly because the aspects of group formation and getting to know the department are too beneficial to do away with, but the linguistic motivation for the course has partly gone: students now coming in with new „communicative“ GCSE and A-levels² no longer need linguistic loosening up, or if they do, then it is only to the extent of having to lose their inhibitions in a new context.

What many of them need is attention paid to elementary correctness. Hence a change was implemented into the first year course to focus on this aspect, establishing a stronger grammar component and a „Lesekurs“, an introduction to reading long, complicated literary and „literaturwissenschaftliche“ texts in German. Neither the „communicative“ intensive course nor the focus on grammatical correctness and reading longer texts was introduced as a result of thinking in terms of governing methods – e.g. the communicative one then and now, perhaps, a return to grammar-translation. They were introduced as a result of analysing students' needs. If anything, they were anticyclical in terms of methods, in both cases to counteract some of the deficiencies produced by a somewhat one-sided approach.

Assessing the linguistic needs of students, the objectives of the course and the available staff should be the most obvious prerequisites of any attempt to describe the language component of a university curriculum.

² For a detailed description of the changes in the linguistic profile of the student intake after the changes in the school curriculum, cf. the contribution by TOWNSON/MUSOLFF (1993:30ff).

The students of German at university level seem to come from a relatively uniform group – most of them having either A-level, AS-level or Leaving Certificate German³ and having gone through a similar process of schooling.⁴ They enter into courses which fall broadly into three categories: traditional literature courses, area studies type courses, and new combined courses such as German with Business, etc. While these various types of courses will have a different thematic emphasis, they do have some aspects in common:

- They take in students, most of whom have gone through language instruction (rather than natural language learning) for a period long enough to have covered most major structures of the German language but who are now, as a group, not on the same level as far as skill profile, correctness level, attitudes towards correctness etc. are concerned.
- Their students spend a given amount of time (three or four years) at the university.
- Their students are probably going to spend six months or a year in a German-speaking environment – in a work context, as assistant teachers or as students -, and will use this time either to meet interesting people from other English-speaking countries and to keep the German environment at a distance, to immerse themselves totally into the German language and culture, or to do something inbetween. After the year abroad some students will have fossilised their mistakes in German while others will have made vast improvements on all levels.
- The designers of the courses have to make a decision whether and to what extent the so-called contents element and the language element of the course are to be integrated.
- The courses are often executed by members of staff who are experts in all kinds of things except language teaching.
- The courses are bound within a given exam culture with an emphasis on objectivity which can make certain forms of language learning and teaching seem less attractive because of its perceived „fuzziness“ in exam terms.

³ I am excluding the matter of *ab initio* courses which obviously ask for a separate detailed analysis, not possible within the confines of this paper.

⁴ But behind the similarity lurks an amazing variety of language profiles resulting from varying amounts of time spent in German-speaking countries, communication with German relatives etc. Students can display quite an amazing imbalance as far as spoken and written German is concerned. Each year some can be found who have an excellent communicative command of the language, including proper use of modal particles, appropriate use of different registers etc., but who display very mediocre writing skills and a low level of correctness.

Different ways of placing grammar within the course

Within these parameters the role of grammar in the language component can take very different forms.

- a) It could be used as an independent linguistics element with emphasis on the analysis of language, preferably in contrast with English for intercultural insights.
- b) It could be used as a stand-alone grammar class, in which grammatical items are dealt with which are either regarded as „post A-level“ or which have proven to be difficult left-overs from school days.
- c) It could be integrated into language units which are thematically defined. All grammar related activities here would only be treated in connection with work on a given topic. There is, however, still the proviso that grammatical elements should be given an „explicit“ treatment with explanations, contrasts and special exercises.
- d) It could be part of a degree course which has abolished the contents/language divide.
- e) It may not feature as a clearly defined entity, but could be submerged into the efforts of teaching and learning the adequate production of different spoken and written types of texts.

As always with a list like this, combinations are possible and the reality of teaching is not as clearly divided as such a list would lead us to believe.

Working with contrastive and intercultural elements

A contrastive and intercultural approach is not just a luxury. Studying a foreign language and culture at university is likely to go wrong if it takes the language simply to be the means of communication and leaves all the relevant cultural observations to the content side of the course. In expressing oneself in a foreign language, one notices, as HARDEN (1990:27) puts it, that:

„Unterscheidungen werden getroffen, die in der gewohnten Ordnung nicht vorhanden sind, und andererseits fehlen Möglichkeiten, gewohnte Unterscheidungen zu treffen.“

The students' own linguistic practice can, therefore, itself become an object of observation. As intercultural observations, once students become accustomed to them, can be most interesting, they also represent a motivational factor which is not inconsiderable. And as motivation is a vital factor at an advanced stage, at which progress seems to be so slow and haphazard, this can be seen as an additional bonus of an intercultural approach.

Stand-alone grammar classes

In a stand-alone grammar class the choice of the grammatical item is not without its hazards. It has to be common enough to justify a whole group dealing with it. The choice of a grammatical item, however, should not only be based on an analysis of the deficiencies of the learners. In addition to such an analysis, one also has to consider whether the general linguistic aims of the course make it worthwhile spending a portion of that scarce commodity, time, on it. Thus while in a literature oriented course with a strong emphasis on reading and writing, time spent on dealing with the intricacies of endings within the noun phrase and on deconstructing extended attributes in order to be able to understand the relationship of linguistic elements in complex noun phrases might be considered time well spent, in a business oriented course which emphasises communicative strategies, negotiating skills, rhetoric etc., the same time might be considered more fittingly spent on contrastive pragmatics, dealing with the different ways indirectness can express politeness, for example, rather than concentrating on advanced morphological aspects of the language.

Integrated units

As far as integrated units are concerned, it is the dream of anyone who has to develop language learning material to create a perfect integration of topic, grammar, types of texts and communicative intention⁵ but, as anyone who has ever developed such material will know, the grammar element is more often than not the odd one out, preventing the harmony. There are, of course, connections between certain types of texts and grammar and between certain communicative intentions and aspects of grammar, but if a whole sequence of units has to be constructed, care has to be taken that the unifying principle does not result in coerced texts and stilted classroom interaction. It might be easier to state occasionally that item X is being dealt with because of general reasons Y and Z.

This general problem of integrating content, other language aspects and grammar is the same in a course which has abolished the content/language divide altogether. My position on this abolition is uncommitted. On the one

⁵ Cf. COX/RÖSLER/SKIBA (1989) for a short description of a database of language teaching material, called „vernetzter Lehrmaterial-Steinbruch“, which breaks the material down into units small enough to allow an analysis of the relationships of these four aspects in a textbook.

hand I see it as an unnatural communicative situation if a lecturer and students, all native speakers of English, discuss „Faust“, „das Althochdeutsche“, „die Grünen“ or „das Betriebsverfassungsgesetz“ solely in German. And I can understand the main objection which is that if all the content elements of the course are taught in the target language, then academic standards will drop and contents will just function as a vehicle for language learning, turning, consequently, the university degree into a language certificate. On the other hand, I am not quite sure whether this argument is as strong as it seems. It automatically equates the removal of the divide between clearly marked contents and language classes with a linguistic situation in which everything is automatically done through the target language.

I imagine that the removal of this divide could, in the first place, herald the removal of those attitudes towards content and language which regard one as being clearly superior to the other. In the second place it could result in a more unified approach to the content, resulting in it being treated equally, both as an object of cultural study and as an element in the process of language learning. Only in the third place, then, would the problem of English versus German as a means of communication in the classroom arise. To what extent German should take over in a situation like this depends on a variety of factors, not least on the level of linguistic competence of students and staff at any given time. The role of grammar has to be regarded in the same way in both cases, c and d: the treatment of grammatical aspects should be integrated as far as possible into the unit, trying to achieve the maximum possible correlation with types of text, communicative intentions etc. The key word here is *possible* – even integration can become too much of a good thing if it clouds students' perceptions of what they are actually doing at any given stage.

No specific post A-level grammar component

There is a very valid point in saying that there should not be a specific grammar component in post A-level language work at all, that all relevant items can be discussed, learned or refined while working on translations, essays etc. Again, this should not be a matter of principle. Everything else being equal, dealing with grammatical problems in the context of texts is naturally more appropriate than dealing with them in isolation, but isolating certain grammatical points and dealing with them does, of course, also imply that they are discussed in the context of their relevant types of texts and/or communicative situations. The decision, therefore, should not be made between „within or without a context“ but should be the answer to the question „Is it worth focusing on a given grammatical item to the extent that a class should be spent on it rather than

waiting and dealing with it when it comes up during a text- or skill-related activity?" The decision for one of the two options should depend on how widespread problems with that particular item in the specific group are, how relevant it is for the target striven for etc., and not on a consideration such as whether it lends itself to final year exam testing or not.

If, in a university course, the students' command of German is such that it could be classified as near-native, one could argue that a special focus on grammar is not needed, nor are any special language classes, and that the students should just deal with the „real business“ of Germanistik. That is true, but it nonetheless misses an important point. With these near-native students, Germanistik courses could indeed be conducted as they are in Germany. But what a waste! If native speakers of English whose command of German can be classified as near-native are studying German, they can be involved in a wider range of activities than those offered by Germanistik in Germany. Even if one does not wholly subscribe to the Humboldt-Whorf view of language, the discussion of the grammatical form of the languages could be included here, as could genuine intercultural reflection on bilingual and bicultural questions. And, bringing language work and literary criticism together, aesthetic questions could be discussed such as those posed by MACHEINER in her *Das grammatische Variet * in which, for example, she asks which aspects of grammar tell us that the original of Kafkas *Vor dem Gesetz*

„Vor dem Gesetz steht ein T rhwter. Zu diesem T rhwter kommt ein Mann vom Lande und bittet um Eintritt in das Gesetz.“ (MACHEINER 1991:19f)

is a better opening than:

„Ein T rhwter steht vor dem Gesetz. Ein Mann vom Lande kommt zu diesem T rhwter und bittet um Eintritt in das Gesetz.“ (ibd.)

Without a proper analysis of the concrete circumstances it is impossible to say which of the described options should be chosen for any given group. Certain assumptions can be made: dealing with a „Grammatik der sch nen S tze“ should be left to final years after their year in a German-speaking area. An intake of first years with severe grammatical deficiencies might call for stand-alone grammar classes if the deficit areas are of particular relevance for the target of the course, but then those aspects could also be dealt with equally well in an integrated course. One factor which should not be lost sight of here is the personality of the staff involved. If a member of the department is to be involved who is the opposite of what one expects of an amateur or a facilitator as defined by ROGERS (1969), but who feels secure in a more authoritative role of provider of knowledge, then an integrated scenario in which this member of staff might also be responsible for the initiation of communication between students in discussions, role plays etc., might not necessarily be the best solution.

Different levels of insistence on correctness are appropriate in different situations

How and where grammar is placed within the curriculum has consequences for the way with which it is dealt. There are at least four different functions of language in the learning environment: „Sprache als Lernobjekt, als Tr ger von Inhalten, als Medium der Unterrichtssteuerung und als Medium der sozialen Interaktion“ (KRUMM 1978:9). If language in a class is purely regarded as a *Lernobjekt*, then its correctness is the main focus of attention. In a stand-alone grammar class, therefore, or in what was traditionally a pure translation class, an almost exclusive attention to correctness is appropriate.

As far as the other three functions are concerned, students' contributions could be judged simply by the criterion of adequacy of communication, which differs from correctness. Insistence on grammatical correctness here has to be seen in relation to the other aims of the learning process. In giving due regard to the „Tr ger von Inhalten“ in an integrated unit, the topics covered have to be kept in balance with attempts to clarify grammatical points.

Turning to the other two functions mentioned by KRUMM, the metacommunicative one and that of real social interaction, it should be clear that interventions in favour of grammatical correctness should be minimal to non-existent. In a classroom discussion about the learning process and, even more important, during social interaction in German in which a student is actually talking about himself or herself, his or her emotions, attitudes or whatever – that is talking in a way in which the *I want to say this now* clearly outweighs the *I am speaking German now* – meta-comments by a member of staff should only be made in their natural form, for example when asking for clarification. Any corrective action during genuine social interaction destroys that communication and replaces it by a type of interaction in which a linguistically superior participant of the conversation displays dominance by changing levels.

Not only do the types of classes influence the way we deal with grammar, individual circumstances within a group do so too. In a group discussing a topic of minor concern, an uninhibited talker could be interrupted to have his or her attention drawn to a mistake, even though other ways of dealing with mistakes in conversational aspects of language learning are usually preferable (cf. R SLER 1980). A member of the same group who contributes something for the first time after a long silent period should definitely not be interrupted. Again, as with the positioning of the grammar component within the curriculum, the answer to the question regarding the degree to which correctness has to be insisted upon is „it depends“.

Grammar is meaningful

Is there no escape from this „it depends“? There is a simple guideline which often gets lost in the everyday struggle with grammar. Students should not simply perceive grammar as an abstract system, the intricacies of which have to be mastered if exams are to be passed. They should deal with it because it is meaningful, it allows us to communicate in a complex way, to express nuances, to understand different types of texts etc.⁶ This should manifest itself in all aspects of dealing with grammar. Here, briefly, are two examples. If extended participial attributes are dealt with, students should not be given the impression that these attributes are only there to be transformed into relative clauses⁷ – an assumption which can easily be made when working with some exercise books – just because this seems to be a good way of practising (and testing) them. If these exercises are to be done at all, they should only be done after types of texts in which extended participial attributes are bound to occur have been dealt with, and they should be introduced to clarify the relationships within a complex noun phrase in the context of reading strategies. This should make it clear to students why having to cope with these „odd“ German constructions is meaningful.

Corrections, rather than just stating that something is incorrect, could be used to inform students about the linguistic status of mistakes. If, for example, a student translates *this was finally too much for our curiosity* with *dies überkräftete schließlich unsere Neugier* then of course it has to be pointed out that „überkräften“ is not part of the norm⁸ of the German language, but at the same time an encouraging acknowledgement should be made of the fact that (s)he obviously knows words like *entkräften* and *übersteigen* as well as the rules of word formation, and that (s)he has used the German system creatively – something which is punished in a final year exam but might well be an asset the next time (s)he is going to write a novel in German.

The more the teaching of grammatical structures is combined with insights into the way language works and into the communicative function of grammar, with intercultural reflections on the differences between languages as well as

⁶ Cf. EISENBERG (1986:29): „Für den Grammatiker kommt es darauf an, in der sprachlichen Form den Gedanken und seine Struktur bzw. den gemeinten Sachverhalt und seine Struktur wiederzufinden. Er beschäftigt sich nicht mit der sprachlichen Form, weil er ein Formalist ist, sondern weil die Form funktional ist.“

⁷ Especially as exercises which ask students to transform extended attributes into relative clauses often seem to generate problems within the relative clause itself.

⁸ Cf. COSERIU (1988) for his most recent description of *System-Norm-Rede* and its delimitation from de SAUSSURE's *langue-parole* and CHOMSKY's *competence-performance*.

with a consideration of the aesthetic dimension of language, the less relevant divisions between grammar and content, between explicit vs. implicit learning etc. will become.

REFERENCES

- COSERIU, E. (1988), Sprachkompetenz. Tübingen.
- COX, S. / RÖSLER, D. / SKIBA, R. (1989), A Tailor-Made Database for Language Teaching Material. *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 4,4, 260–264.
- EISENBERG, P. (1986), Grundriß der deutschen Grammatik. Stuttgart.
- GROSS, H. / FISCHER, K. (Hg.) (1990), Grammatikarbeit im DaF-Unterricht. München.
- HARDEN, T. (1990), Interkulturelle Aspekte des Grammatikunterrichts. In: GROSS, H. / FISCHER, K. (1990), 219–234.
- HARDEN, T. / MARSH, C. (Hg.) (1993), Wieviel Grammatik braucht der Mensch? München.
- HELBIG, G. (1991), Grammatik und kommunikativer Fremdsprachenunterricht. *Fremdsprachen lehren und lernen* 20, 7–24.
- KRUMM, H.-J. (1978), Kommunikativer Fremdsprachenunterricht als Gegenstand der Sprachlehrforschung und der Lehreraus- und -fortbildung. *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht* 47,12, 6–19.
- LOFMARK, C. (1990), Grammatikunterricht an einer britischen Hochschule: Ein Bericht. In: GROSS, H. / FISCHER, K. (1990), 171–179.
- MACHEINER, J. (1991), Das grammatische Variété. Frankfurt/M.
- RÖSLER, D. (1977), Audio-linguale oder kognitive Fremdsprachenvermittlung – eine falsche Alternative? *Zielsprache Deutsch* 3, 1977, 8–15.
- RÖSLER, D. (1980), Konversationsklassen. *Zielsprache Deutsch* 3, 1980, 2–10.
- RÖSLER, D. (1983), Endstation integrierter FU. In: APPEL, J. / SCHUMANN, J. / RÖSLER, D. (1983), Progression im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Heidelberg, 117–172.
- RÖSLER, D. (1989), Interkulturell ausgerichtetes Lehrmaterial DaF. In: *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache* 14, 221–237.
- ROGERS, C. (1969), Freedom to learn. Columbus.
- TOWNSON, M. / MUSOLFF, A. (1993), From caterpillar to butterfly or: What happens in the chrysalis? In: HARDEN, T. / MARSH, C. (1993), 30–46.
- WOODS, R. (1990), Die veränderte Rolle der Grammatik im universitären Deutschunterricht im Großbritannien. In: GROSS, H. / FISCHER, K. (1990), 181–197.
- ZÖFGEN, E. (1987), Welche Methode für den Fremdsprachenunterricht? *Fremdsprachen lehren und lernen* 16, 183–202.