New Perspectives in EFL and ESP Grammar Teaching. Case Study

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Abstract

This paper deals with new perspectives and challenges related to teaching grammar in an EFL class and highlights the fact that grammar instruction should be focused more on an eclectic approach rather than on a single teaching method. The theoretical section compares traditional and modern language teaching methods, highlighting some advantages and disadvantages. The practical section represents the pedagogical research, whose purpose is to demonstrate the efficiency of modern teaching methods of English verb tenses that can be applied in the EFL classroom. The research conducted on two groups of students, i.e. an experiment and a control one, was based on the hypothesis that the use of key elements and strategies specific to the modern teaching methods of English verb tenses increases the quality of instruction and of student achievement.

Key words: EFL, grammar teaching, learning, modern approach, traditional approach
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1. Introduction

The two protagonists of an educational process, the teacher and the learner have always given birth to debates regarding the extent of each one's importance and leadership. There are clearly many differences in a traditional model classroom compared to the modern one. For instance, in a traditional classroom, the teacher usually controls of all classroom interactions, while in modern learning processes, the interactions among students prevail. Additionally, in traditional learning environments, teachers tends to talk almost all the time and often uses L1 for various explanations and translations (Chirobocea, 2018); thus, the students' speaking time is less than the teacher's. As a result, the students become bored and demotivated in learning English. On the other hand, in an English learning classroom where the teacher uses innovative techniques and methods, there is a simultaneous interaction between the students, who can discuss different views in pairs, be engaged in task solving and have enough time to express their points of view.

2. Theoretical background: modern vs. traditional teaching

Traditional (teacher-centered) approaches are still commonly used, especially in public schools. These methods are characterized by several drawbacks, such as the fact that they do not focus on learners and on their interests and needs; they are concerned with covering the context and with rule memorization; they fail to involve learners in creative thinking activities; instruction is mostly unilateral. Modern language teaching approaches transformed this learning context, being focused on innovative and creative activities that place the learner at the center of the teaching and learning processes. For instance, in modern teaching methods (which are conceived as reactions against traditional teaching approaches), the learning process is active, contextualized or constructive and learners are seen as information constructors, who acquire knowledge and language skills in accordance with their own experiences, culture and perspectives on the environment. Moreover, via social negotiation, learners "test their hypotheses and create new knowledge, correct previous knowledge, or confirm present knowledge" (Khalid and Azeem, 2012: 170).

Lord Thomas R. (1999) considers that, by applying modern teaching methods, teachers support learners during the problem-solving process and during inquiry-based learning activities, learners being able to formulate, state and verify their ideas, draw different conclusions and convey their knowledge and language skills in a collaborative learning background. Thus, learners are no longer seen as passive information recipients, required to memorize mechanically the knowledge transmitted; on the contrary, they become participants guided by their teacher (who translates the information into an appropriate format, in accordance with the learner's needs, capabilities and knowledge level) and involved actively in the learning process (Lord, 1999: 22-28).

The traditional ESL/EFL classroom is focused on the teacher; it is usually monopolized by direct and unilateral (i.e. teacher-learner) instruction/ teaching, with mainly uninvolved learners. In traditional classrooms, learners have to acquire certain knowledge and skills, memorize the pieces of information provided by the teacher, without asking any questions (Stofflett, 1998). The teacher transmits knowledge to the passive learner, with little or even no room for independent ideas or learner-learner interactions ("Virginia Association of Science Teachers", 1998). The teacher does not encourage debates, explorations and analyses of the taught concepts, triggering the ignorance of critical thinking. According to Khalid and Azeem (2012: 172), "the innovative approaches pose a question to the students who work together in small groups or individually, in order to discover one or more solutions". Therefore, students are more active and perform various learning tasks together, teachers assisting them in the development of unique insights, creating connections with their past knowledge, and leaving the discovery mission and the debates to learner groups ("Virginia Association of Science Teachers", 1998). For this purpose, the teacher organizes the class in different teams, asks questions and demands learners to work in teams, debate their ideas and present them to the whole class. Thus, "students are able to develop their own understanding of the subject matter based on previous knowledge and can correct any misconceptions they have" (Khalid and Azeem, 2012: 172).

Although both traditional and modern teaching approaches can entail successful language learning, the literature has revealed that modern and innovative contexts enhance the learners' enthusiasm and interest in the respective subject matter. However, from Scheurman's perspective (1998: 6-9), since the innovative, modern approaches need additional lesson planning, many language teachers hesitate to use them. Nowadays, there is an increasing change in learners and teachers' roles and relationships. Students must cope with the added responsibility for their learning, but also they have to dispose of suitable learning strategies (Maruntelu and Dumitrascu, 2011). This applies to the cognitive exposure with knowledge (organization, elaboration, critical examination and retrieval) and to the meta-cognitive strategies of planning, controlling and regulating learning processes and to the application of internal motivational and external supportive resources. Thus, learning has become learner-centered and new approaches have been developed such as communicative language teaching (CLT), contextual teaching and learning (CTL), community language learning (CLL), Suggestopedia, the silent way, task-based language (or TBL) teaching, neuro-linguistic programming (see Zamfir, 2006; Nadrag, 2009).

These new approaches to foreign language teaching became very popular and, according to Vizental (2007: 369), "brought about great changes in the field of language teaching and testing", focusing on meaning and interactions, employing task-based activities and encouraging learner independence, in order to animate language lessons, to actively engage students, to motivate and attract them by focusing on their short-terms and long-term needs. Contrary to traditional methods, modern methods focus more on the communicative competence. This involves the ability to use the foreign language in accordance with a certain social environment. The innovative approaches and activities are aimed at helping learners move beyond mastering the structures in a foreign language and reach the point where they can use them to communicate meaningfully in real life situations. Therefore, in foreign language learning, success is attained when learners developed their communicative competence, when they are able to apply their knowledge of formal and sociolinguistic language aspects and when they hold an adequate communication proficiency. Thus, the modern approaches to foreign language teaching widely use the communicative ability and concentrate more on the spoken form of the respective foreign language (see Nadrag, 2013).

3. Research methodology

Classroom research suggests that teaching and learning English verb tenses by modern approaches contributes to the creation of a friendly and pleasant atmosphere and directly influences the students' achievements in a positive manner (Lee and Smith, 1999; Shouse, 1996). Moreover, recent literature has highlighted the close connection between the students' social and academic skills, creating productive and academically engaging community-oriented classroom environments, focused on social and academic learning (Duncan et al., 2007). Since the ESP class should provide students "the tools to function in their field of activity and face any linguistic challenges" (Chirobocea, 2016: 97), the purpose of this section is to demonstrate the efficiency of the modern approaches to teaching and learning English verb tenses in the EFL classroom. Therefore, the main hypothesis of our research is as follows: if we use key elements and strategies specific to the modern/alternative approaches to teaching and learning English verb tenses in the EFL classroom, we will increase the quality of instruction, students will show increased achievement, with good behavior, adapted to the requirements of school life.

Considering the main hypothesis of our research, we used, as research methods, the observation and the experiment. The former deals with the direct observation of phenomena in their natural environment or context (Stenhouse, 1975), while the latter is carried out to verify, reject, or validate a hypothesis. Our observational research and experiment dealt with activities and elements specific to the modern/ alternative approaches to teaching and learning English verb tenses and with their influence on the students' academic achievement.

This research was conducted in the academic year 2017-2018, in the first semester, on two groups of students majoring in Business Economy, 2nd year of study (a control group and an experimental one), on two teaching units, i.e. one focused on present simple tense and the other dealing with present continuous. In order to demonstrate the efficiency of modern/ alternative approaches to EFL teaching, with the control class, we used traditional teaching methods, while as far as the experimental class is concerned, we applied key elements specific to modern/alternative teaching and learning approaches. As already mentioned, the latter are student-centered and based on entertaining activities, student-student interactions and teamwork. In this respect, we had in view concrete, highly practical teaching strategies that integrate academic and social-emotional learning.Before the experiment, we assessed the students' English skills and level of knowledge by giving them initial tests. At the end of our experiment (i.e. after the teaching stage), the students took a final test and we analyzed and compared their results, in order to verify the validity of our hypothesis. As far as the teaching materials are concerned, we used "*Market Leader -Business Grammar and Usage*", by Peter Strutt (Longman, 2000) and "*Check Your English Vocabulary for Business and Administration*", by Rawdon Wyatt (A&C Black, 2007) and other worksheets, handouts and cards on the topics discussed in the classroom, when the texts and the exercises from the textbooks mentioned above were insufficient or did not meet our teaching goals.In order to reach a high reliability and validity degree of the research results, before the experiment, we made sure that the control and the experimental groups are heterogeneous in terms of the number of students, age, gender distribution, cognitive level and social background.

4. Findings

The control group had 20 students, aged between 19 and 21 years old. As far as the students' English skills and knowledge are concerned, the initial tests applied to the control group revealed the following results:

Table no. 1 Initial English test results (control group)

Marks	Below 5	5-5.99	6-6.99	7-7.99	8-8.99	9-10	Average
No. of students	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	6 (30%)	3 (15%)	4 (20%)	2 (10%)	6.95

Source: author's personal processing

Table 1 reveals that the students belonging to the control group got quite low marks in their initial English test, i.e. 15% of the students did not pass the test and 40% got marks between 5 and 6.99. More than one third got between 7 and 8.99 and only 10% got between 9 and 10.

The experimental group had 19 students, also aged between 19 and 21. As far as the students' English skills and knowledge are concerned, the initial test applied to this experimental group revealed the following results:

Table no. 2 Initial English test results (experimental group)

Marks	Below 5	5-5.99	6-6.99	7-7.99	8-8.99	9-10	Average
No. of students	2 (10%)	4 (21%)	5 (26%)	4 (21%)	2 (11%)	2 (11%)	6.81

Source: author's personal processing

Table no. 2 presented above reveal that the students from the experimental group also got quite low marks in their initial English test, i.e. 10% did not pass the test, almost one half (47%) got marks between 5 and 6.99 and one third (31%) obtained marks between 7 and 8.99. The data above show that both the control and the experimental groups are similar as far as the students' English skills and age are concerned (i.e. 2 students from the experimental class and 3 students from the control class did not pass the test; 9 students from the experimental class and 8 students from the control class got marks between 5 and 6.99; 6 experimental students and 7 control students got marks between 7 and 8.00; 2 students from the experimental class and 2 students from the control one got marks between 9 and 10).

As already mentioned, for the purpose of this research, we used both traditional EFL teaching methods (for the control group) and modern/ alternative strategies and activities for teaching and learning English verb tenses (for the experimental group), in order to demonstrate the efficiency of the latter. Therefore, for the control class, the lessons consisted of traditional activities and exercises such as "Look, listen and repeat", "Choose the right answer", "Match", "Listen and talk with your friend", "Put the words in the right place", "Put the verbs in the right order", "Complete the sentences", "Circle and correct the mistakes".

The modern/ alternative approaches require creativity and are designed to provide a well-managed classroom environment, enhance the students' social and emotional learning processes, and integrate both social and academic learning and the teaching of social skills because the academic success should also be connected to social skills, such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility and empathy. Thus, with the experimental group, I used modern strategies and techniques in the ways of organizing students, engaging academics, classroom management, student-centered principles, components and activities. The practices applied in the experimental group included interactive, fun and engaging activities designed to provide students the opportunity to share information about themselves; for example, we played games such as "Storyboard game", "Hot Verb-Tato", "Verb Snip", "Relay Race", "Twenty Questions Verb Edition" (see Chou; Long, 2015; Shvidko, 2016). In the "Storyboard game", I prepared a logical story, based on ten pictures. I jumbled the pictures and asked my students to arrange them in order to tell the respective story and to talk about one picture in relation to the others, using present simple or present continuous.

In order to play "Hot Verb-Tato", I arranged students in a circle and played some background music. The student holding the "potato" (a ball) had to make a sentence with a verb in present simple or continuous before tossing the "potato" to another colleague. When the music stopped, the student that held the "potato" received a punishment (for instance, I asked him/her some questions in English about his/her daily routine). For the "Relay Race", I wrote some sentences (the verb was missing) on the whiteboard. I divided my students into two teams and asked them to go in front of the classroom. Then I asked them to complete the sentences with a suitable verb in present simple or continuous, the affirmative, negative and interrogative form (depending on the context) (the first student in line filled in the first blank, the second student filled in the second blank and so on, until they finished all the sentences). The team with the greatest number of correct verb forms won the game. In order to play "Twenty Questions Verb Edition", I asked one student to come in front of the class and gave him/her a verb. The other students had to guess the respective verb by means yes/no questions, in present simple or continuous; such questions are: "Do you do it in the office?" "Yes!" "Do you do it during a meeting?" "No." "Are you reading a report?" "No!" "Are you

typewriting?" "Yes!" I limited the number of questions (no more than five questions) that the students could ask in order to guess the verb.

Other practices typical of the modern/ alternative teaching approaches, which we employed in the experimental class, included interactive modeling, logical consequences, student practice, interactive learning structures, active teaching, guided discovery, classroom organization and collaborative problem solving (see *Teach.com*, 2016). Thus, tasks became more active, interactive, challenging and connected to the students' interests. Furthermore, they were accompanied by clear directions, high-quality feedback and effective classroom management, against a background that encouraged the students' autonomy and focus on the learning process. At the end of our experiment (i.e. after the teaching stage), the students passed some final tests and we analyzed and compared the results obtained by the control and the experimental classes, in order to verify the validity of our hypothesis (i.e. the modern/ alternative approaches to teaching and learning English verb tenses increase the quality of instruction, students show increased achievement, and good behavior, adapted to the requirements of school life).The statistics of the students' results are presented in the tables below:

Table no. 3 Final English test results (control group)

Marks	Below 5	5-5.99	6-6.99	7-7.99	8-8.99	9-10	Average
No. of students	1 (5%)	2 (10%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	4 (20%)	3 (15%)	7.4

Source: author's personal processing

If we compare the results presented above with the ones obtained by students in their initial English tests, we notice only a slight improvement in their EFL skills. Thus, initially, there were 3 students that did not pass the test, while one student failed the final test. The percentage of those who got between 5 and 6.99 reduced slightly (i.e. from 40% to 35%). There were more marks between 7 and 8.99 (35% in the initial test and 45% in the final test); the number of the marks between 9 and 10 also increased (from 2 to 3). This reveals that the traditional methods used with the control group helped students improve their school results only to a low extent.

Table no. 3 Final English test results (experimental group)

Marks	Below 5	5-5.99	6-6.99	7-7.99	8-8.99	9-10	Average
No. of students	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)	5 (27%)	7 (37%)	5 (26%)	8.25

Source: author's personal processing

The data in the table above reveal that the experimental students greatly improved their ESP skills. First, all students passed the test. Moreover, the percentage of the grades between 7 and 8.99 and between 9 and 10 doubled (i.e. from 31% to 64% and from 11% to 26% respectively). It should be noted that marks between 5 and 6 have reduced significantly, i.e. from 47% to only 10%. These results reveal the efficiency of the principles, strategies and activities of the modern/alternative approaches to English teaching grammar and learning. By comparing the final test results from the two groups, we may notice that the experimental students got a higher general class average. Moreover, 5% of the control students failed the test, while all the students from the experimental class passed it. As for the control class, 35% of the students got marks between 5 and 6.99, compared to only 10% in the experimental class; 45% of the control students got between 7 and 8.99; 64% of the experimental students got this mark. More than one quarter of the experimental students (26%) got the highest marks (between 9 and 10), i.e. almost double compared to the control students (only 15% got marks between 9 and 10). Consequently, these test results highlight that our hypothesis (the modern/alternative approaches to teaching and learning English grammar increase the quality of instruction; students show increased achievement, and good behavior, adapted to the requirements of school life) is valid.

5. Conclusion

Due to the fast social and technological changes brought about by the twenty-first century, nowadays, schools must aim at training new learner types, responsible and focused on the continuous improvement of their language skills and on long-life learning. It is noteworthy that the concurrent focus on the improvement of both thinking and language skills, learners will be able to enhance their linguistic and communicative skills and apply new approaches in their interactions. Finally, modern teaching methods also aim at transforming learners into mediators of the language learning process, mediators that can also frame their own learning. This is achieved by professing concepts such as cross curricula connections, learner autonomy and uniqueness, by stressing skill enhancement, perception and experience, by capitalizing the non-linear structure of the taught material, by applying basically communicative task-based activities, by prioritizing the extra-linguistic focus of activities, by developing and reinforcing powerful and creative thinking (Vizental, 2007: 53-54).

6. References

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