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## TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO POLISH STUDENTS AT THE ACADEMIC LEVEL \*

### 1. Introductory remarks

For some years now it has been evident that teaching grammar to students of the English language is an essential requirement, not to say a *sine qua non* for the basic curriculum in the Departments of English at the universities and in the Teacher Training Colleges in Poland. For this reason the syllabi include three types of grammar courses: descriptive grammar, practical / remedial grammar and English-Polish contrastive grammar, taught usually at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of studies.<sup>1</sup> Our discussion, for explanatory purposes, will be limited to the description of current courses offered in the Institute of English Philology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

It is worth stressing that the prevailing linguistic framework within which English grammar is taught to the first and second-year students derives from the traditional structural approach. A similar stance has been taken in the classic survey, which is also one of the most comprehensive pieces of research into English grammar, *A grammar of contemporary English* (first published in 1972). Written by the team of authors (R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik) who claim that despite their having taken into account “the insights of several contemporary schools of linguistics,” they subscribe to no specific current and show no bias towards any more or less fashionable trend. Well-aware of the “undoubted merits” of all the schools of linguistics, the authors see also their drawbacks and limitations. Being thus unable to follow one particular theory to account for all linguistic phenomena in English in a homogeneous way, they

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\* A shortened Polish version of this article was published in Duszak A., Gajek E., Okulska U. (ed.) 2006. *Korpusy w angielsko-polskim językoznawstwie kontrastywnym*. Kraków.

<sup>1</sup> We realize that English historical grammar is also taught at the universities and in most of the colleges, but – due to the limited scope of this article – we exclude it from our considerations.

have drawn heavily on the “long-established tradition” (cf. Quirk et al. 1972: vi).<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Descriptive grammar of English

The course lasts for three semesters and is targeted at the first and second year students, who first become acquainted with the basic concepts in the field of morphology and then are introduced to various phenomena in the field of syntax.<sup>3</sup> Grammatical problems discussed cover, among others, word-classes, sentence constituents, grammatical functions and categories, sentence and clause types, as well as moods and modalities. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> year the discussion of the syntactic phenomena in English becomes enlarged with elements of semantic and pragmatic interpretation, to show the intricate dependences among the three major aspects of natural language. The main issues cover now: semantic roles, the taxonomy of speech acts with their syntactic realization and pragmatic dimension, negation and its logical scope, compound and complex sentences with the detailed typology and thematic variation of clauses. The lecture constitutes the theoretical foundation for the classes in Descriptive Grammar, which focus on the consolidation and broadening of the hitherto acquired knowledge of English grammar, basically practical. The first two semesters are devoted to a detailed discussion of the English noun, pronoun, article, adjective, adverb and verb (e.g. inflection and derivation, word order, tenses, moods). Rather than practise a purely mechanical knowledge of language, the students develop the ability to comment on and explain grammatical issues, a skill which they find difficult to achieve but which is indispensable in their future activities as EFL teachers, but also as translators and conference interpreters. The classes in Year II continue to have a mixed theoretical and applied character. The students develop further the ability to discuss grammatical issues, that is they develop a metalanguage of grammatical commentaries. Special attention is devoted to modal constructions, gerundial vs. infinitival constructions, passive voice, reported speech, conditional constructions with all their variants, and different subordinate clauses in English. The course, apart from giving the students a practice in the present-day English, prepares them in the direction of writing their future M.A. theses in the English language and methods of teaching it as a foreign language.

The basic Reading List for the entire course contains the following selected grammar manuals and exercise collections available on the Polish market or in the university libraries:

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<sup>2</sup> Although the grammar written by Quirk et al. (1972) has now been replaced with the more modern elaboration of the subject in *The Cambridge grammar of the English language* written by R. Huddleston and G.K. Pullum (2002) and advertised as the “grammar for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, we still think that Quirk et al.’s work (1972) is a valuable resource and reference book for academic purposes.

<sup>3</sup> In the programme of our Institute phonology and phonetics are not included in Descriptive Grammar – they are taught as separate courses.

- Graver B.D. 1963/2004. *Advanced English practice*. Oxford.
- Huddleston R. 1988. *English grammar. An outline*. Cambridge.
- Huddleston R., Pullum G.K. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge.
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- Swan M. 1995. *Practical English usage*. Oxford.
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- Thomson A.J., Martinet A.V. 1986. *A practical English grammar*. Oxford.
- Thomson A.J., Martinet A.V. 1986. *A practical English grammar. Exercises 1, 2*. Oxford.

By way of illustration let us quote some exercise types, used especially with the second-year students, on tests and the final examination.

**Exercise 1.** Explain fully the DIFFERENCE in meaning between the sentences in each set:

1. A. She must have been happy with what she had.  
B. She had to be happy with what she had.
2. A. If you lend me the money, I'll make perfect use of it.  
B. If you will lend me the money, I'll make perfect use of it.  
C. Should you lend me the money, I'll make perfect use of it.
3. A. I would like to have told you about it.  
B. I would have liked to tell you about it.

**Exercise 2.** Explain the MEANING and illustrate with EXAMPLES the USE of the following grammatical forms. Focus on the DIFFERENCES between them:

1. I will talk to him tomorrow. vs. I'll be talking to him tomorrow.
2. We could not answer. vs. We couldn't answer.
3. For no money would she dance naked. vs. For no money, she would dance naked.
4. the painting of Brown vs. the painting of Brown's
5. was to do it vs. was to have done it

**Exercise 3.** Correct the ERRORS that you can identify in the following sentences. Give an EXPLANATION. The correction alone is not enough!

1. I'd rather you haven't said all that nonsense about him.
2. Not until had they crossed the borders they stopped feeling unsafe.
3. The boy, who opened the door, smiled at me.
4. Up went he.
5. His still-lives have always fascinated the merchants.

The exercise of this type contains also well-formed sentences to make the task more demanding for the student. It is interesting to note that several of such ill-formed constructions are examples of errors that actually appeared in written works or tests written by Polish students of English. Although we do not possess a separate corpus of “wrong constructions attested among Polish learners of English” (“the humour of the copy-books”, we might say), teachers often have at their disposal such data, drawn either from their own experience or quoted in the literature.

**Exercise 4.** EXPLAIN why the following sentences or phrases may all be AMBIGUOUS. Insert – if helpful – additional lexical material to disambiguate them:

1. He would never kiss me.
2. He took the vase, which was awful.
3. The tiger may be dangerous.
4. the men’s clothes
5. old books and magazines.

The reader will have noticed that the classes in Descriptive Grammar include partly the area traditionally covered by the courses in the practical grammar of English, which in our Institute is no longer taught as a separate subject, but has been parcelled between Descriptive Grammar on the one hand and the more comprehensive course called Integrated Skills in English on the other. Remedial Grammar, once a continuation of Practical English in the third year of studies, has undergone a similar merger.

Although the structural approach is the foundation of the course, we should mention two notable departures from this paradigm. Leech and Svartvik’s *Communicative grammar of English* (1975), listed above, marks the movement away from a strictly structural approach towards a communicative framework, so-called “grammar in use,” influenced by the developments in semantics, pragmatics and discourse studies in the 1970s. The authors claim their indebtedness particularly to the functional approach, propagated first by M.A.K. Halliday in his well-known book *Explorations in the functions of language* (1973), and to the “communicative teaching” that came into vogue about the same time.

The second grammar book which stems from a different background is *Cognitive exploration of language and linguistics*, edited by R. Dirven and M. Verspoor (1998). As the title indicates, it contains a succinct presentation of main fields of linguistics, on the example of the English grammar, in the cognitive framework. We are of the opinion that the book should be used with more advanced students, who have mastered the basics of the traditional and structural approach to English (students in their M.A. seminars or extra-mural M.A. students, who are graduates of Teacher Training Colleges). The students should be made aware of the differences in linguistic taxonomies (to mention for instance semantic roles or typology of speech acts), different terminology and different descriptive approach to language espoused by cognitive linguistics. For this reason the book does not belong to the Reading List for junior students, quoted above.

### 3. English-Polish contrastive grammar

The course in English-Polish contrastive grammar, taught in the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of Year II (30 hours) as a continuation, in a sense, of the course in Descriptive Grammar, aims at highlighting these areas of contrast between English and Polish which cause a certain amount of difficulty both in learning and teaching English as a foreign language at the academic level and where the Polish users of English commit frequent errors. Although it is both possible and desirable to compare languages on all levels of linguistic analysis, due to the time limitations of the course, the discussion of the phonemic and graphemic levels of representation are omitted from the consideration in class. Interested students are addressed to Fisiak et al. (1978) for some discussion of the phonological contrast between English and Polish. As the traditional structuralism is used as the basis of description, the pragmatic aspects are automatically excluded from consideration, leaving place only for the combined syntactic and semantic analysis. This is the reason why the following areas of contrast are pointed to:

- morphological, including the differences stemming from the fact that English is an analytic while Polish is a synthetic language;
- lexical, including easily confused words, “false friends”, common collocations, prepositions, etc.;
- grammatical, including considerations of word order, subject-verb concord, the tenses, etc.

In the course the book *A contrastive approach to problems with English* by E. Willim and E. Mańczak-Wohlfeld (1997) is used as the leading manual. It consists of five chapters. The first four chapters are divided into sections. Each section of a chapter contains a number of exercises preceded by brief descriptive remarks drawing the student's attention to the more difficult aspects of the phenomenon discussed in English and Polish. The descriptive remarks are not meant to provide full coverage of the lexical and grammatical problems of English. Rather, they aim at providing analytical descriptions of the relationships between associated phenomena in English and Polish. More complete descriptions of the various aspects of the English grammar and problems of correct usage in English at the advanced level may be found in a number of textbooks now available to the Polish learner, for instance in B.D. Graver's *Advanced English grammar* (1963/2004) and M. Swan's *Practical English usage* (1995; mentioned in section 2), or L.G. Alexander's *Longman English grammar* (1991) and *Longman advanced grammar* (1993). The emphasis in Willim and Mańczak-Wohlfeld's book (1997) is on the comparison of some central points of vocabulary and grammar in English and Polish and on practising them through exercises. That is, the two parts, theoretical and descriptive, are not symmetrical, with the theoretical part based on contrastive analysis and the practical part reflecting the authors' experience of the learners' problems. The authors rely on the learners' prior knowledge of chosen aspects of the grammars of English and Polish and their aim is to make explicit their knowledge and intuitions of the two languages. The exercises are both instruments of testing and paths to learning.

The last chapter contains only exercises, wrapping up the material discussed in the previous chapters.

All the examples in the descriptive parts are given both in English and in Polish. The majority of the exercises are based on translation (either from English into Polish or vice versa). Some exercises are restricted to English, but these are constructed in such a way as to draw on the contrasts between the two languages. The authors have also included a number of exercises aimed at giving the students more practice in those areas where they are inclined to make relatively more mistakes which are not necessarily related to the contrasts between their mother and target languages, but which are not given sufficient attention in other books dealing with the more difficult aspects of English.

Following the most recent trends in foreign language teaching, the authors have also suggested exercises with syntactically ill-formed or semantically deviant sentences meant to be corrected by the users of this manual. It is worth emphasizing that all these sentences are attested and have been drawn from various written works of the students of the first two years in the Institute of English Philology and the Teachers' Training College of the Jagiellonian University of Kraków. Most exercises deal with examples at the word, phrase and sentence levels, but some are based on contemporary texts drawn mainly from English newspapers and books, illustrating both the written and spoken variety of present-day English. Let us now quote a short sample of the kind of material contained in the book.

#### 1. Confusing words: *each* or *every*?

Another important source of common lexical problems is the existence in the foreign language of more than one translational counterpart of a single lexical item of the learner's native tongue. For example, *przynieść* may be rendered in English by both *bring* and *fetch*. Problems are also caused by the existence of lexical items in the foreign language which have more than one lexical counterpart in the native tongue, as in the case of *teściowa* and *świekra*, which are both rendered in English as *mother-in-law* (cf. Willim and Mańczak-Wohlfeld 1997: 31). These theoretical remarks are supplemented with practical exercises of the following types, which can be utilized selectively by the teacher and student.

**Exercise 1.** Provide the Polish equivalents of the following English words and comment on how the lexical distinction in Polish correlates with a difference between the senses of the English words. Consult a dictionary, if necessary:

1. paper
2. right (adj.)
3. to miss

**Exercise 2.** Provide the English equivalents of the English words and phrases and comment on how the lexical distinction in English correlates with the difference between the senses of the Polish words and phrases. Consult a dictionary, if necessary:

1. biedny
2. choroba
3. "Cześć!"
4. jechać

**Exercise 3.** Choose the word which best completes each of the sentences below:

1. drugi: *second* or *other*?  
This bedroom is quite big, but how about the ..... one?  
It's seven in the morning and you are smoking your ..... cigarette already!
2. gimnastyka: *exercise(s)* or *gymnastics*?  
We never had any ..... at school. All we did was run cross-country.  
After they take the plaster off, you'll have to do some finger .....
3. kąpać się: *bath* or *bathe*?  
Do you mean to say that you ..... every day? I wouldn't like to have your bills to pay.  
He lived by the sea when he was young and used to ..... every day.
4. kuchnia: *cuisine*, *kitchen*, or *galley*?  
I think I'll buy her a nice set of ..... towels for Mother's Day.  
After they found the body, the camper's ..... was searched thoroughly for fingerprints.  
The ship's ..... was a dark, smelly place with piles of dirty dishes and scraps of food everywhere.

## II. Word order: subject-verb order in English

English is a relatively fixed word order language whereas Polish is a relatively free word order language. Although some variation is possible in constituent order in English, there is a basic word order in a sentence determined by grammatical rules. In Polish, there is considerable flexibility in constituent order and there are few grammatical rules determining word order (for example, prepositions, conjunctions and complementizers all obligatorily precede the constituents with which they combine in Polish). Despite relative freedom of the ordering of main clause constituents, it is usually agreed that the basic, or usual, order of constituents in Polish is, like in English, SVO.

Though the order SVO is said to be the most informationally neutral linearization pattern in English, there is a number of constructions in which the subject and verb are inverted in affirmative sentences in English:

1. If the sentence begins with the adverb *here*, *there*, *now*, or *then*, the subject is not a pronoun and the verb is one of the intransitive verbs of movement, for example:  
*There comes Johnny.*  
When the subject is pronominal, there is no inversion:  
*Down it came.*

2. After certain adverbial phrases in written, literary language when the intransitive verb expresses location, either position or movement in space, and it is in the simple form:  
*In front of me lay the whole valley, like an untouched paradise on earth.*
3. In reported speech, when the subject is non-pronominal:  
*'I love you' said the little boy to the yellow puppy.*
4. After certain introductory expressions, mostly negative in meaning (so-called inverting adverbials), which derive special emphasis from their sentence-initial position:  
*So intense was her anger that she started hitting him.*
5. In elliptical structures with *so* and *nor/neither*:  
*She likes jazz and so do I.*

(cf. Willim and Mańczak-Wohlfeld 1997: 171–172)

Among the exercises appended to this section of the book we find what follows:

**Exercise 1.** Translate the following sentences into English and comment on any differences in the ordering of particular constituents in the two languages:

1. Oni mi nie wybaczą nigdy.
2. W żadnym wypadku nie powinieneś teraz rezygnować.
3. Zapytał, kiedy wraca Ewa.

**Exercise 2.** The following are attested ungrammatical sentences of English used by Polish learners. Identify the nature of each error and rephrase sentences so as to avoid ungrammaticality:

1. \* It didn't take into account semantics.
2. \* I translated him the document as I read it.
3. \* On the table are some books.
4. \* She never will cook for him dinner.
5. \* I can't imagine how could she solve it.

Needless to say, the value of all those contrastive exercises lies not only in the fact that they help the students to minimize the amount of errors / mistakes whose source is the interference between the source and target language, but also that they prepare them for their future professional tasks as teachers of English, translators of written texts and interpreters of spoken English, both formal and colloquial.

#### 4. Selection of handbooks for teaching English grammar

On the basis of the presented course descriptions, it will have become evident that the majority of reference books and exercise selections used in teaching English grammar at the academic level in Poland have been published in Great Britain or the United States. There are only very few exceptions of manuals of English grammar written by the Polish authors and available on the Polish market (if not out of print). Let us mention them in a chronological order:



- Krzeszowski T.P. 1980. *Gramatyka angielska dla Polaków*. Warszawa.
- Krzeszowski T.P., Walczyński W., Włoch J. 1988. *Gramatyka angielska dla Polaków*. Warszawa.
- Willim E., Mańczak-Wohlfeld E. 1997. *A contrastive approach to problems with English*. Kraków.
- Tabakowska E. (ed.) 2001. *Kognitywne podstawy języka i językoznawstwa*. Kraków.
- Mańczak-Wohlfeld E., Niżegorodcew A., Willim E. 1987/2007. *A practical grammar of English*. Warszawa.

The grammar book edited by E. Tabakowska (2001) differs from other positions on the list above in that it contains a presentation of the grammar of natural language in the cognitive framework, in fact the “polonized” version of the *Cognitive exploration of language and linguistics*, edited by R. Dirven and M. Verspoor (1988). Although the Polish version, prepared with the Polish reader in mind, is based on the exemplification drawn basically from Polish, it is an interesting reference book for English majors, especially when used in conjunction with its original version. Since it also contains exercises and problems for discussion appended to each chapter, the following exercise can serve as an example of a contrastive and cross-cultural analysis:

**Exercise 1.** Comment on the following INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS, the degree of their formality and politeness (positive and negative politeness strategies). Compare them with their Polish equivalents – do they use a similar tactics in diminishing the face-threatening aspect of the DIRECT SPEECH ACT: *Shut the door (Zamknij drzwi)?*

1. Can you shut the door, please?
2. Will you shut the door, please?
3. Let’s shut the door, shall we?
4. There’s a draught in here.
5. Możesz zamknąć drzwi?
6. Zamkniesz drzwi?
7. Czy może pan/i zamknąć drzwi?
8. Zamknie pan/i drzwi?
9. Zamykamy, dobrze?
10. Straszny tu przeciąg.

Such an exercise, which should follow the discussion of modal constructions in English and of the main principles of the Speech Act Theory, combines the syntactic, semantic and pragmatics aspects of natural language.

It is regrettable that so few books on English grammar (theoretical and practical) have been published so far by Polish linguists, who – undoubtedly – have a better understanding of the needs of Polish learners, especially in what concerns the contrastive studies. On the other hand, we realize that the age-long tradition of writing and compiling pedagogical grammars has prevailed in Great Britain (where British grammarians cooperate with the American and Australian

experts in the field, but also with the well-known scholars from outside the English-speaking communities).

## 5. Recourse to corpus data in teaching English grammar

While considering the handbooks and reference books on English grammar available on the Polish market from the perspective of their indebtedness to Corpus Linguistics, it soon becomes manifest that very few of them rely directly on corpus data in the strict sense of this word. Quirk et al. (1972), who set their aim specifically to provide an in-depth account of the “common core of educated English” that would raise above the differences of register or native varieties such as British or American usage, claim that they drew their analytical material from two sources: i) corpora of contemporary English (about which they are not specific) and ii) data from specially constructed elicitation tests. They frankly admit that: “For reasons of simplicity and economic presentation, however, illustrative examples from our basic material are seldom given without being adapted and edited; and while informal and familiar styles of speech and writing receive due consideration in our treatment, we put the main emphasis on describing the English of serious exposition” (Quirk et al. 1972: v). This simply amounts to saying that raw corpus data may not be an appropriate expository material for a variety of reasons, which we can easily guess at (incompleteness, imperfection, high degree of informality and colloquialism, lack of a strict adherence to grammatical rules, etc.) and, consequently, may even lead not very advanced and discriminating students of English grammar off-track, unless they are carefully guided through the grammatical intricacies of English by a vigilant supervisor.

It ought to be emphasized, however, that B.D. Graver, in his excellent *Advanced English practice*, a skilful combination of a reference and practice book, utilizes “unsimplified examples mostly drawn from or based on authentic sources” (Graver 1963/2004: 12). Even though he does not mention the term *linguistic corpus* explicitly, it is definitely worth quoting him in some length, for the citation below is a concealed invitation to turn to corpus data both in teaching and in studying English:

Students at advanced level, should, in any case, be encouraged to develop a healthy scepticism of ‘rules’ until they have had an opportunity to measure them against the facts of English as they find it. They should be encouraged to keep a record of examples they find in the course of their reading, or they can be asked to identify specific features in a text currently being studied. Provided the teacher gives the necessary framework for investigation, students can be asked to examine modern written English of various registers and styles, with a view to finding out, say, when and where the passive is used and whether or not the ‘agent’ is expressed; or how relative clauses are used, when pronouns are expressed and when omitted, etc. Given the necessary help, students can discover and build up their own grammar of English, in however limited a way.

(Graver 1963/2004: 13)

In view of the importance of corpus data, of which we have become aware only recently, we postulate including appropriate corpuses, or at least their selected fragments, in the teaching materials that are to be produced, hopefully, in the future – specifically for the Polish students of English at the academically oriented advanced and proficiency levels. This should facilitate teaching the English language in its practical aspect, taking into account constant changes that the language undergoes as a living organism. Hence, the corpuses, in order to preserve their value, demand a continuous updating. Here we are touching on the extremely important issue of specifying what can be called a representative and reliable corpus and how quickly it can become outdated. This problem needs a separate treatment, though, and can be only signalled here.

We need also a comprehensive corpus of ill-formed and anomalous constructions bound to appear in the learners' English – typical mistakes committed by the Polish students. So far such material has been contained mainly in M.A. theses and doctoral dissertations written in various academic centres. The preparation of a generally accessible "corpus of errors" should find its due consideration among researchers in the field of the methodology of teaching. Such corpus, however, must be used with great care and under the guidance of experienced teachers, otherwise it could only further the grounding of the existing errors / mistakes, instead of helping the students-future teachers of EFL in their eradication.

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## Streszczenie

### Gramatyka języka angielskiego w nauczaniu studentów polskich

Od dłuższego czasu stało się oczywiste, że gramatyka języka angielskiego jest warunkiem *sine qua non* w programach nauczania na filologiach angielskich w Polsce. Z tego powodu obejmują one trzy typy kursów z gramatyki: gramatykę opisową, tzw. praktyczną gramatykę języka angielskiego oraz angielsko-polską gramatykę kontrastywną. Opis tych kursów został ograniczony do przedstawienia obecnie realizowanych zajęć w Instytucie Filologii Angielskiej Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Dominującym modelem językoznawczym, w ramach którego gramatyka języka angielskiego jest wykładana studentom I i II roku, pozostaje tradycyjny strukturalizm. Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na konieczność korzystania z podręczników opierających się na danych korpusowych. W związku z tym, że takie podręczniki są nieliczne, postuluje się włączenie odpowiednich danych z korpusów językowych do materiałów pedagogicznych, jak i stworzenie w miarę kompletnego „korpusu błędów”, które pojawiają się w angielszczyźnie Polaków.

In fact, general English is quite grammar-driven, with a big focus on verbs and tenses, whereas studying EAP involves a greater emphasis on skills. However, because accuracy and clarity are crucial in order for academic writing to have credibility, it is still important to ensure that your grammar is correct. One major difference between general and academic language is that an academic register relies much more heavily on nouns. Julie used some examples, which we analysed together, to show that in a typical conversation, the verb: noun ratio is about 1:1, whereas in a typical academic text it