

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Grammar to Prospective Teachers of English

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ABSTRACT. This article seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching grammar to prospective teachers of English, in particular with reference to those grammatical areas which reflect specific patterns of Anglo-American culture, such as modality. Such areas are best understood if they are introduced with some elements of intercultural training, which helps to link grammar with other curriculum subjects.

KEYWORDS: grammar; modality; teaching; intercultural training; integrated curriculum.

The dominant model of grammar teaching in most Polish universities and teacher training colleges is the structural one. This model is adopted by most books devoted to practical English grammar, descriptive grammar and contrastive grammar. In this approach, grammar is presented as a sequence of structures, which are described in terms of their form and usage. It is a convenient approach allowing a systematic description of grammatical structures, which, however, frequently leaves students with the impression that grammar exists in some sort of linguistic vacuum. If grammar is taught in isolation, without any reference to the social and cultural context in which English has developed and is used, numerous areas of language are bound to suffer. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching grammar, which places grammar in a socio-cultural context linking it

with other courses which students take up during their studies, such as the history of England and the USA, English and American literature and the culture of English-speaking countries.

Grammatical categories can be compared on a cross-linguistic level to investigate the mechanisms by means of which reality is conceptualized in different cultures. The ways in which a linguistic community conceptualizes reality are historically, socially and culturally determined and they are reflected in numerous areas of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, proverbs, idioms, typical collocations, folk tales, as well as in folk beliefs and rituals (BARTMIŃSKI 2006:13). The adoption of the HUMBOLDTIAN (1999) view of language as an expression of culture as the guiding principle in training prospective teachers of English allows a holistic description of this language and helps to integrate various disciplines which are part of the curriculum. It also helps to avoid the unnecessary and often harmful separation of grammar from other areas of language description.

Students are introduced to various aspects of English grammar in a number of courses, such as practical grammar, descriptive grammar, contrastive grammar and historical grammar, all of which may benefit from the intercultural and interdisciplinary approach suggested here. Such intercultural approach seems to be best suited to contrastive grammar because contrasting native forms with foreign forms is an essential aspect of intercultural training (ALEKSANDROWICZ-PĘDICH 2005). However, most coursebooks designed to teach Polish-English contrastive grammar pay little attention to cross-cultural contrasts. The classic book in the field, *An Introductory English-Polish Contrastive Grammar* written by FISIAK, LIPIŃSKA-GRZEGOREK and ZABROCKI (1978), is strongly influenced by Chomsky's generative grammar and makes no reference to culture. A more recent publication, *A Contrastive Approach to Problems with English* by WILLIM and MAŃCZAK-WOHLFELD (1997), adopts the structural model of language description and makes little reference to the social and cultural heritage of English. Many descriptive grammar books, such as HUDDLESTON (1988), also see grammar solely as part of the linguistic system. Books which represent a functional approach to grammar, such as DOWNING and LOCKE (1992), provide numerous examples of the use of various structures in authentic texts, but still they lack the broad perspec-

tive on grammar offered by the intercultural approach. Practical grammar books used at English departments at Polish universities are usually those written by English writers and concentrate on the systematic presentation of grammatical structures (c.f. CHRZANOWSKA-KLUCZEWSKA and MAŃCZAK-WOHLFELD 2006). In one of the most comprehensive grammar books of the English language, QUIRK et al. (1985), the authors go as far as to suggest that English is culturally neutral and claim that *it carries less implication of political or cultural specificity than any other living tongue* (1985:16).

Such views are not infrequent and result from the widespread *tendency to mistake 'Anglo English' for the human norm* observed by WIERZBICKA (2006:11–13). The existence of many varieties of English associated with different cultural traditions has made Anglophone scholars reluctant to talk about the Anglo heritage shared by the varieties of English spoken in Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, as WIERZBICKA (2006) rightly notices, the knowledge of the Anglo cultural patterns and values embedded in common English expressions, speech routines and grammatical structures is very useful to both foreign learners of English and immigrants to English-speaking countries. WIERZBICKA's book, *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006), and her earlier publications are probably the best sources of information for the English teacher who wishes to enrich his/her grammar classes with elements of intercultural training.

There are many grammatical categories which are best understood when they are introduced in the context of social and cultural values which they are linked with. Speech acts, for instance, are performed differently in Polish and English. In English, interrogative sentences, which are considered more polite than declaratives and imperatives, have a much wider application in making commands, requests, and exclamations. The passive voice in English tends to put human subjects in the foreground, e.g. *I was given a cup of tea*, which may be explained by the emphasis on the importance of an individual in Anglo culture. The conceptualization of the same event is different in Polish counterparts of such sentences, where emphasis is placed on the action, and the person is assigned the role of the passive object, e.g. *Poczęstowano/poczęstowali mnie kawą*. Another culturally determined category is modality, which is expressed by modal

verbs, adverbs, adjectives and other linguistic and extralinguistic items. Because it seems to be one of the most important and, at the same time, one of the most problematic grammatical categories, it will be discussed in more detail in the present work.

Modality is the category by which speakers express their attitudes and relation to reality. Modality can take two forms, epistemic and deontic. Epistemic modality refers to the cases when speakers assess the probability that a given event is true, whereas deontic modality refers to the situations in which speakers give permission or lay obligation on their interlocutors (DOWNING and LOCKE 1992:381–382). Both kinds of modality are problematic for students of English as a foreign language. As WIERZBICKA (2006:251) notices, *the need to qualify one's statements and differentiate one's degrees of 'epistemic commitment' is greater in English than in most other languages*. If speakers do not speak with *the appropriate degree of conviction*, they *sound abrupt, rude or didactic* (HOLMES 1982, quoted in WIERZBICKA 2006:251). In addition to a large stock of epistemic expressions, English has a rich repertoire of causative constructions associated with deontic modality, which have their specific uses and forms designed to preserve the personal autonomy of the people who are directed to do something (WIERZBICKA 2006:171–203). When non-native speakers of English make requests or commands violating the Anglo principle of 'non-interruption' and 'non-imposition', they sound abrupt and impolite. Such cross-cultural knowledge is very useful to future teachers of English, who, one day, will have to explain the use of modal expressions to their students.

The patterns of Anglo culture associated with the grammatical category of epistemic modality can be traced back to the Enlightenment and scientific revolution, which fostered the respect for empirical knowledge and rational thinking, most successfully illustrated in and disseminated by the writings of the English empirical philosopher, JOHN LOCKE, in particular his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Polish culture, in turn, has been shaped by the ideas of Baroque and Romanticism (HRYNIEWICZ 2003, BARTMIŃSKI 2007), which gave priority to spontaneity and emotions over rational thinking and empirical evidence. The scientific nature of many colloquial expressions found in English, such as 'exactly' or 'precisely', is connected with the conviction that human

knowledge is limited and that opinions need to be expressed with great caution. Such ways of thinking and expressing opinions are largely alien to traditional Polish culture, which is why special attention should be paid to the way epistemic modality is introduced in the process of teaching English.

The historical development of the category of modality can be presented to students during their course in historical grammar. Here, the pre-Enlightenment usage of modal expressions found in Shakespeare's works can be contrasted with their use in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, where the influence of empiricism is already visible. References to literature and history allow a holistic description of English and make grammar classes more fruitful and challenging by giving students the opportunity to reason, connect facts and apply their knowledge in different contexts. Descriptive grammar and practical grammar classes can be used to present English modal structures within the social context in which they function. Finally, contrastive grammar may be the forum for a contrastive and cross-cultural analysis of English and Polish modal expressions. There seems to be a great need for such an integrated approach to teaching culturally shaped grammatical structures because the (otherwise often useful) structural description seems to be insufficient in this case.

English has a wide range of epistemic expressions, some of which do not have exact counterparts in Polish. Epistemic adverbs constitute probably the most numerous group of these. WIERZBICKA (2006) lists the following: *probably, likely, possibly, supposedly, seemingly, conceivably, allegedly, reportedly, arguably, presumably, undoubtedly, unquestionably, certainly, clearly, evidently, obviously, apparently*. Most of these adverbs express degrees of possibility and probability. Polish students of English, however, tend to prefer those expressing degrees of certainty. Students who write their diploma theses under my supervision tend to include in their works such statements as: "Teaching grammar is *undoubtedly* an inseparable part of mastering English / It is *rather obvious* that grammar plays a significant role in mastering a language / *Unquestionably*, grammar plays a significant role in learning a foreign language / Although there are a number of models of conducting a lesson, the PPP model is *undeniably* the most popular one". In the second example, the epis-

temic adjective *obvious* is preceded by the diminisher *rather*, but it does not seem to change the message in any significant way. The tendency to overuse such expressions can be partly explained by the students' intention to stress the importance of the subject matter they have chosen to write about as well as the effort they have put in writing their theses. A similar motivation can be seen behind exaggerated statements included in students' introductions to various chapters or sections of their works, for example "This section contains a *profound* analysis of the age group". The word *profound* is often used interchangeably with such words as *detailed*, *in-depth*, and *thorough*, and the introduction is followed by a two- or three-paragraph discussion based on one or two publications. Such discussions are far from being thorough, and, contrary to the students' intentions, they reveal gaps in their knowledge combined with the lack of critical attitude towards their works, and suggest the need for extensive intercultural training.

A good source of information about the use of modal expressions by Polish learners of English is the corpus of students' works called PICLE. PICLE is the Polish section of ICLE, which stands for International Corpus of Learner English. It was compiled in the School of English at A. Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and contains essays written by Polish ESL students (c. 330,000 running words). PICLE is available on the Internet¹, where it is accompanied by a few comparable corpora. One of them is a corpus of British and American quality press editorials and popular science book excerpts (c. 94,000 words), another one contains excerpts of British academic textbooks and introductory books (c. 98,000 words). The PICLE web site includes also two Polish corpora: a corpus of Polish academic papers and quality press articles, and a corpus of Polish secondary school compositions, thus offering a lot of possibilities for a Polish/English contrastive analysis.

The comparison of the use of selected epistemic expressions by native speakers of English and Polish learners of English who contributed their essays to PICLE brings interesting results. The table below illustrates some of the differences:

¹ http://ifa.amu.edu.pl/~kprzemek/concord2advr/search_adv_new.html.

Epistemic expression	PICLE		Comparable corpora of English and American texts	
	The number of occurrences in the whole corpus (330.000 words)	The number of occurrences per 100.000 words	The number of occurrences in the two corpora (192.000 words)	The number of occurrences per 100.000 words
probably	131	39,70	55	28,64
possibly	14	4,24	20	10,41
perhaps	46	13,94	83	43,22
apparently	19	5,76	12	6,25
likely	75	22,73	90	46,87
presumably	3	0,91	12	6,25
evidently	3	0,91	9	4,68
undoubtedly	47	14,24	10	5,20
undeniably	8	2,42	1	0,52
certainly	104	31,52	39	20,31
obviously	40	12,12	20	10,41
obvious	104	31,52	13	6,77

The expressions included in the table can be divided into two groups: those expressing degrees of probability (*probably, possibly, perhaps, apparently, likely, presumably*) and those expressing certainty (*evidently, undoubtedly, undeniably, certainly, obviously, obvious*). Expressions of probability are more frequent than expressions of certainty in the texts written by native speakers of English: 141,64 out of 189,53, which is the total number of epistemic expressions used by native speakers per 100.000 words. *Likely* is used here twice more often and *perhaps* three times more than in PICLE. Polish students, in contrast, seem to prefer words expressing certainty (92,73 occurrences) to expressions of probability (87,28). The number of words expressing a high degree of conviction is almost twice as high as the number of such expressions found in the corpora comprising texts written by native speakers of English. The ones with the highest frequency among Polish learners of English are *certainly* and *obvious*. *Obvious* was used by the Poles over four times more often than by the English and American authors. The construction *It is obvious*, which is not included in the table, occurs 35 times in PICLE, whereas in the English and American corpus it is not used at all. Some epistemic expressions, such as *presumably* and *evidently* are almost never used by

Polish ESL students, whereas *probably* seems to be overused, which suggests that student tend to use a relatively small range of English epistemic expressions, most likely those which have direct equivalents and high frequency in Polish. It is also important to note here that PICLE contains both correct and incorrect uses of English structures by Polish learners of English, so it seems likely that the students' competence in the use of epistemic expressions is overestimated here.

A contrastive analysis of the use of deontic expressions by Polish learners of English and native speakers brings similar results.

Deontic expression	PICLE		Comparable corpora of English and American texts	
	The number of occurrences in the whole corpus (330.000 words)	The number of occurrences per 100.000 words	The number of occurrences in the two corpora (192.000 words)	The number of occurrences per 100.000 words
can	1539	466,36	557	290,10
have to	365	110,61	57	29,68
should	956	289,70	312	162,50
ought to	46	13,94	18	9,37
forced to	53	14,55	4	2,08

The figures presented above suggest that Polish students use deontic expressions much more frequently than native speakers of English (895.16 and 493.73 occurrences per 100.000 words, respectively). Expressions referring to strong obligation are found significantly more often in PICLE than in the Anglo-American corpus. *Have to* is used three times more often by the Poles than by the native speakers of English, and the frequency of the expression *forced to* is seven times higher in PICLE than in the Anglo-American corpus. Students use this expression also in their diploma projects to describe various activities that take place during an English lesson, they write, for example, "In this activity students *are forced to talk*". The verb *can* has the greatest number of occurrences in both corpora, but, similarly to other expressions analysed here, in the Polish corpus it is used more often than in the Anglo-American texts.

The findings presented above suggest that Polish students of English have numerous problems with both epistemic and deontic modality. They tend to express their opinions with an inappropriately high degree of con-

viction, and use strong causative constructions violating the Anglo-American principle of avoiding imposition on other people, which may result in failures in intercultural communication. Like many other grammatical categories, modality is a complex and multidimensional concept, which requires an intercultural approach to present it clearly to students. Such an approach allows placing grammar in a broader perspective and helps to integrate it with other curriculum subjects. It teaches students to apply their knowledge in different contexts and to notice the reflection of social and cultural history in language and literature, which makes it relevant to their needs as both language users and future teachers of English.

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