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Comparing the language skills and grammatical competences of German language teacher trainees

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Abstract

Grammar, as a system of rules in a language, holds an important place in the process of foreign language teacher education. The knowledge of the linguistic structure of the German language combined with the skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking constitute a meaningful whole with a mutual consistency. They can also be referred to as declarative and procedural knowledge. They serve to develop a consciousness of language and/or language learning. Based on such understanding, the present study aims at examining the relationship between the development level of writing, reading, listening and speaking skills and of grammatical competence of the teacher trainees. Comparing the findings of the project ‘The Problem of Language Competence in German Language Teacher Education within the Context of Istanbul University’ carried out by the academic staff of the Department of German Language Teaching and the exam results of German Grammar II course, this study explores whether there is a significant correlation between the trainees’ success levels of language skills and grammar.

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Keywords: Language skills; communicative competence; grammatical competence; German Language Teaching; German language teacher training programs

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1. Introduction

Communicative competence in a foreign language requires the skills to use the language as well as the knowledge of the rules of the language. These two types of knowledge, which are also called declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge, constitute a whole by complementing each other. Therefore, the development of four basic language skills, that is, reading, listening, writing and speaking, should be considered in direct relation with the grammatical competence (Canale & Swain, 1980: pp. 29-30).

Accordingly, German language teacher training programs offer such courses as Reading Skills, Writing Skills and Oral Communication Skills as well as German Grammar I, German Grammar II, German Grammar III and Comparative Grammar. When the quality of German language teacher training is at stake, the very first thing that is usually desired from teacher trainees is a satisfactory level of both grammatical competence and language skills. In this respect, a conceivable question might be: What kind of relationship is there between grammatical competence and reading, listening, writing and speaking skills? In other words, is there a significant relation between the development level of language skills and that of grammatical competence? This question serves as a starting point for the present paper.

2. Methodology

Within the scope of the project named ‘The Problem of Language Competence in German Language Teacher Education within the Context of Istanbul University’, which is supported by the Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of Istanbul University, the development of teacher trainees’ language skills has been monitored by the academic staff of the Department of German Language Teaching of Hasan Ali Yucel Faculty of Education of Istanbul University. The target group is the currently second-year students, who enrolled in the Program of German Language Teaching in the academic year of 2010-2011. The trainees have been monitored through the administration of Goethe Institute’s C1 tests, the use of which has been approved by Munich Goethe Center; the tests have been administered by specialists from Goethe Institute. Based on a comparison of the findings of the above-mentioned project and the exam results of German Grammar II course, the present study sets out to explore the relationship between the development level of language skills and that of grammar within the context of German Language Teacher Training Program of Istanbul University.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the Goethe Certificate C1 Exam that were given on May 13 and 14, 2011 within the scope of the project named ‘The Problem of Language Competence in German Language Teacher Education within the Context of Istanbul University’ put forward the following findings:

1. 2010–2011 Spring Term (May) General Mid-Test 1 (Those below C1= 81%; C1= 19%)
2. 2010–2011 Spring Term (May) Mid-Test 1 Reading Comprehension Skills (Those below C1=86%; C1=14%)
3. 2010–2011 Spring Term (May) Mid-Test1 Listening Comprehension Skills (Those below C1= 27%; C1= 73%)
4. 2010–2011 Spring Term (May) Mid-Test1 Writing Skills (Those below C1= 84%; C1= 16%)
5. 2010–2011 Spring Term (May) Mid-Test1 Speaking Skills (Those below C1= 43%; C1= 57%)
6. 2010–2011 Spring Term (May) German Grammar II Final Exam (Those below C1= 86%; C1= 14%)
Börner and Vogel (2001:8) maintain that grammar consciousness-raising supports the development of both language and communicative competence. Thus, what follows is an analysis to explore the relationship between grammatical consciousness and communicative competence.

Table 1: Results of German Grammar Exam and Goethe – Certificate C1 Exam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Goethe Certificate C1 Exam</th>
<th>German Grammar Exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*G-S1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S3</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S4</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S5</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S6</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S7</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Goethe Certificate C1 Exam Student 1

The results offer the following implications: The students at C1 level of language skills are not necessarily at the same level of grammatical competence. However, the results of the two students (G-S1 and G-S5) imply that the students at C1 level of language skills might have a similar or same level of grammatical competence. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this issue, some background information regarding the pre-university education processes of these two students who demonstrated C1 level in both exams might be useful: Both students lived in Germany for twenty years, completed their pre-university education there and hold an Abitur diploma. It is in fact a long-established belief that the students who learned German in Germany have better language skills, especially in oral communication, but do not demonstrate the same level of declarative and/or grammatical knowledge. However, the results presented above make this belief contentious and in turn require more data-driven analyses.

The following table displays the proficiency levels in each language skill of the students who demonstrated C1 level as a result of Goethe Certificate C1 exam:

Table 2: Results of Goethe – Certificate C1 Exam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Reading-Comprehension</th>
<th>Listening-Comprehension</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G-S1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S3</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S4</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S5</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S6</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-S7</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings of the table lead us to question the common-sense belief the students who came from Germany and demonstrated C1 level language skills are not proficient enough in reading and writing skills. Only one student has been found to be below C1 level in writing skills and two students in reading skills. Then, the view that the students at C1 level are more proficient in speaking but less proficient in other skills such as reading and writing becomes unwarranted. The following table shows the Goethe Certificate C1 Exam results of the five students who successfully passed the Grammar Exam:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>German Grammar Exam</th>
<th>Goethe Certificate C1 Exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-S1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-S2</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-S3</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-S4</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Below C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-S5</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*German Grammar Exam Student 1

The results displayed in the table problematize the widely-held view that students who have attained high levels of proficiency in speaking skills usually have lower levels of proficiency in grammar. Given that the five students who successfully passed the grammar exam all lived in Germany previously, the results put forward that the students who came from Germany can too be proficient in grammar. What further make these results significant is that all the students who were successful at both Goethe
Certificate C1 Exam and grammar exam either completed, at least partially, their pre-university education in Germany.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the following question comes to be prominent: What should be done to improve both the language skills and grammatical competence of the students who have never been to Germany? Without doubt, it is an issue which requires due attention by the departments of German language teaching since it is one of the primary objectives of these departments to train well-qualified German language teachers with high levels of language competence.

Given that five students out of the seven students who demonstrated C1 level in Goethe Certificate Exam were relatively unsuccessful in the grammar exam, it is an inevitable task to promote the development of their grammatical competence. Moreover, the case of those students who learned German in Turkey and were not successful in the grammar exam shows the necessity of further efforts to develop their grammatical competence as well as language skills. Beyond question, it is a demanding task to achieve. Yet, this small-scale study carried out within the context of German Language Teaching Department of Istanbul University puts forward the necessity of finding viable and effective ways to deal with the language problem of German language teacher trainees on the basis of data-driven systematic research studies rather than cliche-driven and stereotypical evaluations.

References


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Fig. 1. (a) first picture; (b) second picture

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\[ R_t = K E P = 93.02 \pm 9.62 - 13.45 \]

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References

of Scientific Communications, 163, 51 - 59.


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