

IS THE USE OF METALANGUAGE NECESSARY IN TEACHING GREEK AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT LEVEL A2

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Abstract

The question of whether or not to use metalinguistic terminology when teaching foreign languages has been discussed by many applied linguists in recent years. The methodological tradition seems to favour a more explicit and deductive approach to presenting grammar and language teachers scorn at any notion of a communicative approach to language teaching and grammar instruction in particular. However, today there is a general depreciation of the methods of the past and very often modern teachers opt for a more communicatively-oriented classroom with more implicit approach to grammar teaching, making little if any use of metalinguistic terminology.

The purpose of this article is to raise the practitioners' awareness of the fact that the decision whether to employ a more formal approach to the explanation of [Greek] grammar will depend on many factors, including learners' age, educational background, experience of learning other foreign languages, level of motivation and their level of proficiency in the target foreign language, as well as the educational context in which the learning takes place and the possibility for the learners to use the foreign language outside and beyond the language classroom. What is important to remember is that teachers should not over-generalize any recommendation and study carefully the needs of their own learners and the effects of any methodological approach that they adopt on them, as there is no universal prescription as to what counts as effective grammar teaching.

Key words: *use of metalanguage in teaching grammar, teaching Greek as foreign language*

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The purpose of this article is to raise the practitioners' awareness of the fact that the decision whether to employ a more formal approach to the explanation of [Greek] grammar will depend on many factors, including learners' age, educational background, experience of learning other foreign languages, level of motivation and their level of proficiency in the target foreign language, as well as the educational context in which the learning takes place and the possibility for the learners to use the foreign language outside and beyond the language classroom. What is important to remember is that teachers should not over-generalize any recommendation and study carefully the needs of their own learners and the effects of any methodological approach that they adopt on them, as there is no universal prescription as to what counts as effective grammar teaching. For example, it is reasonable to expect that an adult educated student will have different expectations of FL grammar instruction and requirements for metalinguistic presentation of new grammar structures from an elementary school student who is still ignorant of the metalinguistic terms even in his or her native language. Adult learners of Greek who are instrumentally motivated in their language learning pursuit (e.g. economic migrants) will also have different requirements within the educational process from, say, language students on an EU Erasmus exchange programme in the country where the target language is spoken. Last but not least, the use of metalinguistic terminology in the teaching of grammar will also depend on the grammar structure being taught.

The Case Study

In the case study described below, I investigated one of these parameters which influences the teacher's decision of whether to use metalinguistic terminology and formal explanation of grammar when teaching Greek as a foreign language, namely the learners' language level i.e. their proficiency in the target language. As held above, students' requirements of metalinguistic concepts when learning the grammar of Greek vary from level to level. It is also logical to expect that metalinguistic terms should be

avoided in cases where learners have already developed their linguistic instinct. However, in our case, how could A2 level students have developed such instinct, that is more likely to be present in higher levels where the student communicates without thinking too much? The speakers of A2 level need a more systematic approach to grammar in order to organize in their minds the vast linguistic system.

Apart from the trainees, another important parameter that should be taken into account is the teachers. The teachers try to adapt to constant changes specified either directly by training providers or indirectly by the course books that are being constantly updated, thus making the teacher's task even more difficult. The teacher is asked to carry through with the successful outcome of a course relying on a method that may be incorrect, inadequate or not suitable for the students' needs.

Methodological framework

The collection of research data attempted in this paper is based on teaching grammatical phenomena in two groups of students, where the one is being taught with the use of metalanguage and the other is being taught with no use of metalinguistic terminology. It is important to examine whether the students' performance is affected by the use of metalanguage or not, and thus extracting useful conclusions about whether metalinguistic terminology should be used or not, or to what extent, during an A2 level course. It is also examined whether an initial level, such as that of A2, requires the use of metalanguage due to lack of the linguistic instinct which allows us to speak without reference to rules and therefore without the use of metalanguage material.

The sample

The experiment consists of two groups of 12 persons who were taught the simple and continuous future and the conjugation of the nouns. Both groups belong to A2 level of the Greek language, which arose on the basis of a written examination they took. In order to obtain more accurate results, I tried as far as possible to ensure that the students of both groups have common characteristics. For example, to be European citizens, who are learning the language from scratch, but not economic migrants, since their motives for learning a language differ in that case and the results would be misleading. Furthermore, I chose people who have completed secondary education, thus are aware of metalinguistic terms in their native language. The knowledge of metalinguistic terms in the native language is more likely to favour the search of metalinguistic terms to explain grammar in the foreign language due to the comparisons. The participants are all adults and speak at least one foreign language.

The experiment was conducted during an ordinary lesson while the participants were not aware of it. Through the experiment, I tried to examine the necessity of the use of metalanguage in teaching Greek as a foreign language at level A2.

Experimental material

It is important to see how both groups were taught the simple and continuous future. The control group was taught in the most representative way of metalinguistic teaching, i.e. using the terms “continuous future” and “simple future”, fully explaining the terms and classifying them to the table of tenses. I thoroughly explained in which circumstances we use each tense and then I wrote verbs on the board and asked the students to identify them. Such an exercise was easy, as I explained that the continuous future is the same as the present tense, with the difference that we put «θα», which means «will», in front of the present tense. Whatever was different from the present tense would be simple future rather than continuous. Such an exercise was very easy for the learners. I continued teaching them how simple future is formed in certain verbs, giving them a list of the most important verbs which belong to A2 level. Then they were given exercises, both written and oral ones, for speech production through discussion and dialogue. Most exercises were based on authentic texts in order to avoid the contact, in the early stages of language learning, with constructed texts not found in their everyday life.

The experimental group was taught the same material, but without the use of metalinguistic terms. The term “continuous future” was replaced by “an act which is done and lasts in the future”, while the “simple future” was replaced by “an act done once in the future, without duration”. This was very easy for the students to understand, but the explanation of the tenses formation proved to be difficult. The problem arose when I had to explain to the students that the continuous future is the same as the present, except that in front of the tense, we add "θα" which means "will". This is a very easy way to explain the form of this tense, but the students were exempted from the creation of tables of tenses. So I had to think of a way to explain the above grammar structure, without using a metalinguistic term. Eventually the “present tense” as a term was avoided and was replaced by "verb". But it was impossible not to use the metalinguistic term "verb".

At this point, it is important to state that the conclusions concerning the educational process of this case study are helpful not only for the students, but for the

teachers as well. This is because the non-use of metalanguage creates difficulties to a teacher who is accustomed to use it. After all, the use of metalinguistic terms relieves the teacher of the task to think of other ways to explain metalinguistic concepts and terms. I would say that, when we try to avoid the terms specifically constructed for the teaching of a foreign language, the teaching process becomes more difficult.

The results of the case study concluded that both the control and the experimental group performed adequately to the evaluation test that followed. There were no significant differences between the two groups. Their evaluation was based on how well they had studied and not on which group they belonged to.

The phrasing of the exercises was different in each group. To be more specific, the control group was given exercises in which metalinguistic terms were present, as well as communicative exercises where there was no use of metalanguage at all. The students seemed to fully understand the requirements of both exercises. But in the case of experimental group, the phrasing of the questions did not include any metalinguistic terminology. For example, in the first exercise the terms “simple future” and “continuous future” were omitted. In the third exercise, the metalinguistic terms were absent and replaced by the phrase “Modify the types in order to express a future act with duration and afterwards a future act without duration”. The rest of the exercises remained the same, as they were communicative ones and the use of metalinguistic terms was not needed.

The second experiment involved the teaching of nouns and their conjugation to the same groups of students. In the control group, I used the following metalinguistic terms: nouns, singular and plural, conjugation, nominative, genitive, accusative and vocative. In the experimental group, the effort to avoid the use of these terms seemed impossible. I was forced to use certain terms, such as nouns and conjugation. But I managed to avoid the names of the conjugation and the terms singular/plural.

The exercises of the evaluation test differentiated again between the control and experimental group, as I completely avoided the use of metalinguistic terminology in the phrasing of the exercises of the experimental group. But the results were not so good for the experimental group because I encountered significant problems in a gap-filling exercise as to which conjugation should be used in each linguistic context. It was impossible to explain to the students the above grammatical phenomena in an effective way without the use of metalinguistic terms.

Conclusion

I can therefore reach the conclusion that teaching a foreign language at level A2 requires an organized methodology and therefore metalinguistic support. It is impossible to teach a language without using its own metalinguistic terms. This is because language is based on rules that only someone who has cultivated his linguistic instinct can escape from.

But teaching a foreign language becomes very difficult for the teacher, who in some cases can avoid metalinguistic terms, but in other cases the effort to avoid them makes his job particularly difficult, as she has to find other ways of explaining metalinguistic terms. Furthermore, the non-use of metalangue seems unnecessary when the students know the metalinguistic terms from their native language.

The question then arises as to whether the lack of knowledge of metalinguistic terms implies the lack of knowledge of the structure of the target language. Does that mean that native speakers are not that competent in relation to speakers who know the language's structure?

Taking into account the results of my case study, I have reached to the conclusion that the complete absence of any metalinguistic term is not necessary. The metalinguistic terms should be used to the extent that they serve the teaching process. As for the A2 level, the use of metalinguistic terms is totally necessary.

Moreover, it is also noted that many students insist on learning a foreign language by using metalinguistic terms. They feel unable to speak or write without grammar rules and metalinguist terms provide them a support system every time they forget a grammatical phenomenon. That means that the non-use of metalinguistic terms is not applicable in every case.

Last but not least, I believe that learning a language via a communicative approach with no use of metalinguistic terms, requires the learner to be exposed in a natural linguistic environment, where the language is spoken by native speakers. This is what happened to all of us when we learned our mother tongue. It is the easiest way for someone to learn a language. A classroom cannot replace the natural linguistic environment and therefore the use of metalinguistic terms cannot be completely avoided. It is also worth noting that the non - use of metalinguistic terminology often degrades the teaching to adult educated learners, as the explanation of metalinguistic terms makes the lesson seem more unprofessional and amateur.

Appendix

Future tense:

Exercise 1

Να συμπληρώσετε τα κενά με τον κατάλληλο τύπο του απλού ή του εξακολουθητικού μέλλοντα:

- Η ΕΜΥ αναφέρει ότι αύριοόλη μέρα. (βρέχει)
- Το απόγευμαστον κινηματογράφο. (είμαι, εμείς)
- Τιαπόψε στο χορό; (φορώ, εσύ/εσείς)
- Θα σετηλέφωνο να σου πει πριν τις οκτώ. Έτσι είπε. συνεπής λες; (παίρνω/αυτή, είμαι/αυτή)
- Αν δε φύγεις τώραστο ραντεβού σου.(αργώ/συ)
- Μπορούμε να κάνουμε διαφορετικά; (περιμένω/εμείς)
- Πότε.....τα μαθήματα; (αρχίζω εσείς)
- Κάθε μέρα λες πως το τσιγάρο και όλο καπνίζεις. (κόβω/εσύ)
- Έλα κατά τις οκτώ. Τότε σπίτι μου. (πηγαίνω/εγώ)
- Πότε πόσο σημαντική είσαι για μένα; (καταλαβαίνω/εσύ)

Exercise 2

Να γράψετε τον στιγμιαίο και εξακολουθητικό μέλλοντα των παρακάτω ρημάτων. Τι παρατηρείτε όταν σχηματίζετε τον εξακολουθητικό;

Ανεβαίνω, βάζω, βγάζω, βγαίνω, βλέπω, βρίσκω δίνω, καίω, καταλαμβάνω, κατεβαίνω, κλαίω, λέω, μαθαίνω.

Αποτελώ, αφαιρώ, διαιρώ, εκτελώ, εξαιρώ, επαινώ, καλώ, μπορώ, παρακαλώ, πονώ, στενοχωρώ, συγχωρώ, φορώ.

Γελώ, γερνώ, διψώ, κερνώ, κρεμώ, ξεχνώ, πεινώ, περνώ, σχολώ, χαλώ.

Βουτώ, πηδώ, ρουφώ, τραβώ, φυσώ.

Βαστώ, κοιτώ, πετώ.

Exercise 3

Πείτε τι θα κάνετε ή δε θα κάνετε όταν δείτε τα σήματα που εκφράζουν τα παρακάτω:

- μην καπνίζετε
- πηγαίνετε εμπρός ή στρίψτε δεξιά
- στρίψτε δεξιά
- μην τρέχετε περισσότερο από 30 χιλιόμετρα
- προσέξτε, επικίνδυνες στροφές
- προσέξτε, σχολείο!
- Μην πίνετε από το νερό της βρύσης δεν είναι καθαρό
- Μην προσπερνάτε

Nouns:

Exercise 1

Να γράψετε τη γενική και αιτιατική ενικού και πληθυντικού αριθμού των παρακάτω ουσιαστικών: το μεσημέρι, η καμπάνα, το παιδί, ο δάσκαλος, μάθημα, ο μαθητής, Έλληνας, ο εργάτης, ο καθρέφτης, η ομάδα, το άγαλμα, το πάρκο, ο φοιτητής, η πορτοκαλάδα, το πορτοκάλι, ο ταμίας, ο φάκελος, το γραμματόσημο, η καρέκλα, το δωμάτιο, τα λεφτά, το πράγμα, το αηδόνι, το αυτοκίνητο, ο έμπορος.

Exercise 2

Στο κείμενο που ακολουθεί να υπογραμμίσετε τα ουσιαστικά και να πείτε σύμφωνα με ποια ουσιαστικά κλίνονται από τον πίνακα:

Γραμμή Λεωφορείων “Athens Sightseeing Public Bus Line 400”

Η νέα γραμμή λεωφορείων “Athens Sightseeing Public Bus” σας δίνει τη δυνατότητα να δείτε τα σημαντικότερα αξιοθέατα της πόλης με ξεκούραστο τρόπο. Τα λεωφορεία αναχωρούν κάθε μία ώρα από τις 09:00 - 16:00 (χειμερινό ωράριο). Το καλοκαίρι υπάρχουν περισσότερα πρωινά και απογευματινά δρομολόγια. Η διάρκεια κάθε διαδρομής είναι 90 λεπτά. Το εισιτήριο κοστίζει 5 ευρώ και μπορείτε να το αγοράσετε μόνο μέσα στο λεωφορείο. Κάθε εισιτήριο διαρκεί για 24 ώρες και σας δίνει την ευκαιρία για απεριόριστες διαδρομές με τα λεωφορεία “Athens Sightseeing”. Πληροφορίες: τηλ. 185, www.oasa.gr

Διδακτική ενότητα : Ουσιαστικά

Exercise 3

Να συμπληρώσετε τα κενά με το σωστό τύπο των λέξεων που βρίσκονται σε παρένθεση:

-να ξέρετε ότι σας ψάχνουμε εδώ και δύο ώρες. (ο Κώστας, η Μαρία, ο Βασίλης)
- Πώς τον λένε; (εκείνος, φαλακρός, κύριος)
- Κάνει διακοπές σε(διάφορος, μέρος, κόσμος)
-μου είναι επαγγελματίας(ο πατέρας, ο ψαράς)
- Τα νυχτερινάέχουν δύο (το κέντρο, η έξοδος, ο κίνδυνος)
- Ο φορητόςείναι ακριβός και γι’ αυτό προτίμησα να συμβιβαστώ με σταθερό.(ο υπολογιστής, ένας)
- οι γονείς είναι; (ποιος, το παιδί, ο Έλληνας)
- Οι περισσότεροι.....που μαθαίνουν την Ελληνική.....έχουν(ο ξένος, η γλώσσα, το πρόβλημα, το λεξιλόγιο)
- Ο πατέρας και η μητέρα είναι Αλβανοί.(εκείνος, τέσσερα, το κορίτσι/αγόρι)
- Οι μεγαλύτερες..... στην Ευρώπη είναι(η πόλη, η πρωτεύουσα)