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Developing University Teacher Autonomy: New Strategies for Teaching English Grammar

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Abstract With the adoption of new State Educational Standards of Higher Professional Education in Russia and the evolution of different kinds of tests of English, used in the Federal Assessment procedure for universities seeking State Accreditation status students are expected to recognize and use correct English grammar. However, grammar remains one of the most difficult aspects of teaching a foreign language at the university. This study reveals the pedagogical potential of perceived university teacher autonomy in enhancing English grammar teaching through a better understanding of the challenges that students face and developing new and more effective grammar teaching strategies

Keywords Foreign Language Teaching, English Grammar, University Teacher Autonomy

1. Introduction

This template, created in MS Word 2003 and saved as "Word 2003 – doc" for the PC, provides authors with most of the formatting specifications needed for preparing electronic versions of their papers. As a response to the rapidly evolving nature of social and economic life and international cooperation, resulting from Russia having joined in on the Bologna process, higher education institutions in Russia are currently involved in a major process of reform and restructuring, moving toward a two-tier education system, and introducing the third generation of Russian State Educational Standards of Higher Professional Education, which are based on the competence approach to the question of quality assessment in education.

This involves the introduction of new forms of internal and external assessment of educational quality, new forms of organization of studies, including credit system, promoting development of the international scientific collaboration and international mobility of students as well as a number of other specific educational policy initiatives which pursue the goal of preparing competitive specialists. More emphasis is being put on the necessity to develop students' autonomy, considered as their ability to take charge of their own learning[11], on students' information literacy as a skill to work with information from different sources in a context of information abundance, on life long learning, on the so-called significant learning and transformative learning, which

stimulates changes in a learner's personality, on articulation of educational goals.

With the appearance of new forms of internal and external assessment of educational quality, including different kinds of tests of English, Russian students are expected to recognize and use correct English grammar. Meanwhile, according to the data received from a questionnaire distributed among university students of Krasnoyarsk (Russia), a large number of Russian students do not consider English grammar to be very important, but regard it as the most difficult thing while learning a foreign language (see below).

Therefore the teacher faces the following task: how to arouse students' enthusiasm and motivation and to make learning grammar more interesting and accessible?

It seems that at present we have all necessary teaching aids for making learning grammar more interesting and accessible. Long past are the times when the teacher had just a book of grammar exercises. Today teachers are given the opportunity to use various Internet materials along with traditional textbooks. In this respect we should admit that more and more Russian universities provide foreign language teachers with modern equipment, but very often teachers do not have the necessary skills needed to employ different means and methods of teaching.

Teachers of English are provided today with a certain amount of autonomy within the University educational area: they are allowed to choose forms, means, methods and even content of their professional activity. They are expected to be able to take a wide range of important decisions including planning their teaching, assessing of students' grammar proficiency, mastering new forms of grammar teaching environments. In a context of information abundance

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teachers should be able to make a reasonable choice of forms, methods and materials for teaching grammar, the number and the difficulty level of examples and exercises, coming up with new classroom ideas in order to link their teaching of English grammar to their students' professional needs and to support the interest and motivation of students to learn English grammar.

Thus have resulted in teachers of English having to face new challengers and develop new knowledge and skills.

All these factors have given rise to increasing attention being paid to perceived teacher autonomy, which has been actively investigated in the USA and in Europe [1];[2];[4];[18];[31] and is becoming one of important educational issues in Russia, especially in the field of foreign language education [16];[24];[32].

Several researchers have emphasized teacher autonomy as a necessary and complementary part of the learner autonomy concept. Autonomy has also been identified as necessary for a teacher's sense of professionalism[12];[27].

Teacher autonomy is often defined as 'control of one's own work environment' [26: 173], 'freedom to make certain decisions'[30: 490], teachers' capacity to engage in self-directed teaching, including detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action[18];[34]; the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices concerning one's own teaching[2] or teachers' autonomy as learners [29]; [31]. Fried man suggests that teacher autonomy involves 'encouraging and strengthening the power of teachers'[10: 60]. Following this approach, Pearson and Moomaw believe that autonomy in teaching implies teachers' freedom to make professional choice (i.e., to decide appropriate activity for their students or choose their own teaching style) as well as freedom to participate in decision-making[27]. This corresponds to Littlewood's perception of an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out choices which govern his or her actions. According to Littlewood, 'this capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness...'[19: 428]. Continuing this thought, Makarova believes autonomy to be teachers' personality traits, which allow them 'to determine the frameworks for creating their own character and style subject to their own domestic rules and resisting to external destabilizing pressure' [20: 14]. Tambovkina explains teacher autonomy 'the ability to think and act in one's profession independently from foreign will, circumstances, one's own fears; to make one's own choice and important decisions through creating one's own goals and working out individual strategies for meeting these goals' objectives'[32:63].

Generally, most of the existing definitions proposed by foreign and Russian researchers point to one common aspect, which stresses that teacher autonomy requires being self-governed and is based on the recognition of greater power and freedom for teachers in their professional activities and capacity for self-directed professional development.

In our perspective teacher autonomy is defined in terms

suggested by Kamii who referred to the fact that autonomy is an ability, not a right to be self-governing[15]. On this basis we use the term 'perceived teacher autonomy' which seems to avoid confusion between 'provided' and 'perceived' autonomy and corresponds to Myers and McCaulley's definition of perception as 'all the ways of becoming aware of things, people, happenings, or ideas'[21: 1]. Following Arseniev's idea about 'freedomto', which is more positive in respect of personal development and self-actualization than freedom 'from'[3], we consider perceived teacher autonomy as 'freedom to' which implies social interaction, personal development and self-actualization.

A review of the professional literature allowed us to consider perceived teacher autonomy as teacher's generic competence which underlies successful performance across different teaching-related situations through creating one's own professional goals, taking intellectual and moral decisions, making free choices, and self-monitoring one's own professional experience. This competence is determined by teacher's intrinsic motivation toward professional achievement and development, teacher's professional responsibility, creativity and relative independence from external factors.

Based on this definition, an autonomous teacher seems to be ready deal with challenges which appear in the changing educational environment. Within the context of English grammar teaching, perceived teacher autonomy may help the teacher to change the process of explanation and learning of grammar material into a fascinating and professionally-orie nted one through using new English grammar teaching strategies, making choices and taking responsible decisions.

One of the first steps towards making students interested in learning grammar is demonstrating the relevance of studying English grammar for students' professional lives and highlighting practical applications of their grammar knowledge and skills. Participating in conferences, making presentations, preparing reports, and writing business letters and scientific articles are considered today as professional communication skills required of all kinds of specialists. In these professional communicative situations it is not only important what you are talking about but also how you do it. It is also important to show students that their good knowledge of English grammar can help them to guess the meaning of unknown English words. And on the contrary, knowing all the words in a sentence does not guarantee its understanding.

2. Materials & Methods

Among the participants of this study there were 300 non-linguistic university students (213 females and 87 males) and 91 teachers of English (81 females and 10 males) from non-linguistic universities of Krasnoyarsk, Russia. All the respondents were chosen at random and invited to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. They were assured that the data collected would only be used for the sole purpose of the

study.

Two questionnaires were used as diagnostic tools in our research

The first one was directed to reveal university students' perceptions of studying English grammar. Participants were between 16 and 18 years of age with an average age of 16.87. Students were sent the link to an online questionnaire. This questionnaire contained three multiple-choice questions and two open questions aimed at revealing students' views on the processes of studying and teaching English grammar. The multiple-choice questions (Do you have any difficulties in learning English grammar? Do you consider grammar to be important in mastering the English language? Do you consider grammar to be an interesting aspect of the English language?) employed a 4-point scale for participants to indicate their answers (1- yes, absolutely / strongly agree, 2yes, to a certain point / tend to agree, 3- not really / tend to disagree, 4 - certainly not). The open questions included the following ones: 'What are the key points of mastering the English language?', 'What are your perceptions of the best way of learning English grammar?'

The second questionnaire was distributed with the purpose to elicit university teachers' responses and views on the level of perceived autonomy they have / would like to have. Participants were between 23 and 60 years of age with an average age of 38.72. A total of 12 teachers (13%) had 0-4 years of experience, 51 teachers (56%) had 5-15 years of experience, 28 teachers (31%) had more than 15 years of experience.

This qualitative, descriptive type multi-choice questionna ire was elaborated on the base of the method of Dergacheva [7]. It contained eleven items with statements for the assessment of the level of perceived teacher autonomy and was duly validated by experts in the field of higher education. After validation, some items were revised as per the suggestions of the experts.

In this questionnaire, the level of autonomy was measured by estimating the type of teacher's motivation, personality traits (internal locus of control, professional responsibility, creativity) and competences (ability to goal setting, ability to decision making, ability to make choices, pedagogical mindfulness), as well as specific work incentives and disincentives of the university educational area, ensuring teacher's perception of professional autonomy. Part 1 contained questions about the respondents' age, sex, position, length of time worked. Part 2 represented a preliminary question concerning teachers' interpretation of the concept of perceived teacher professional autonomy. Part 3 consisted of 15 statements directed at specific work incentives and disincentives concerning assessment of teachers. Part 4 was designed to measure teacher pedagogical mindfulness. Part 5 contained questions about teacher communication, exchanges and collaborative work. Questions of Part 6 were directed at different components of a given job and were measure teacher's job satisfaction used to self-actualization. Part 7 contained questions about teacher motivation (advancement, recognition, achievement, etc.).

Part 8 contained questions about teacher professional responsibility. Part 9 assessed the abilities to goal setting, to decision making, and to make choices. Part 10 was aimed at the assessment of teacher creativity and ability to innovation. Part 11 consisted of 6 statements directed at specific work incentives and disincentives concerning empowerment. Most of the questions employed a 4-point scale for participants to indicate their answers (1-yes, often, 2-yes, sometimes, 3-rarely, 4-no - for the questions that reflected the participants' professional behaviours; 1- yes, absolutely / strongly agree, 2- yes, to a certain point / tend to agree, 3- not really / tend to disagree, 4- certainly not- for the questions that were directed to reveal the participants' attitudes and work-related personality traits).

3. Results and Pedagogical Implications

The results of our study showed that a large number of students from our sample (85%) consider grammar to be the most difficult thing while learning a foreign language. Moreover, in our sample about 26 % of students admitted not considering a foreign language grammar to be very important and believing that the main thing in speaking a foreign language is to make sense using a definite lexical minimum. The qualitative data received from this questionnaire allowed us to reveal students' perceptions of the best way of learning English grammar, most of which (89%) reflected students' need for getting interested and motivated while learning grammar through the use of different sources of professionally-oriented and personally-s ignificant information. Students also admitted the importance of conscious approach (71%) as well as rational approach (68%) to learning English grammar.

These results lead us to believe that enhancing English grammar teaching is associated with university teachers' capacity to arouse students' enthusiasm, motivation, critical skills, which, in its turn, would seem to be ensured by perceived university teacher autonomy.

The quantitative and qualitative data received after the use of the first questionnaire, were correlated with the data, received from the second questionnaire, estimating teachers' perceptions of their autonomy level.

According to the results received from the second questionnaire in reply to questions from Parts 4,8,9 and 10, about 27% of university teachers are not ready to work with information from different sources in a context of information abundance and have difficulties in planning, making choices, taking responsible decisions in unforeseen situations, assessing the results of one's own teaching. We also observed a lack of perceived autonomy in modern university teachers in the presence of provided autonomy. These results illustrate that provided autonomy does not necessarily lead to professional development and the explicit recognition of perceived autonomy by university teachers of English. It means that perceived teacher autonomy should be intentionally developed.

Within the context of English grammar teaching, development of perceived teacher autonomy requires answering the question about how grammar teaching strategies can be applied in an autonomous way?

Analysis of the received quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaires, studying of more or less recent conceptions and available resources of English grammar teaching[6];[9];[23];[33] and the existing approaches to the definition of teacher autonomy[4];[5];[13];[14];[17];[18] allowed us to suggest the following recommendations for university teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP teachers). These recommendations were successfully put to use by the authors and their colleagues from Krasnoyarsk State Medical University and proved to help ESP teachers use their grammar teaching strategies autonomously through making professional choices and taking responsible decisions reflecting students' needs. These recommendation s include:

- ► Choose the appropriate textbook. The choice of the textbook is one of the most important things in teaching English grammar. In this respect the teacher should be able to evaluate the potential of the textbook through seeing what kind of grammar drills it provides and what content they are based on. The content should be up-to-date, functional (able to be used for various learner activities), suitable for students' linguistic level, for their professional and cultural context.
- ▶ Avoid imposing "popular" methods, stereotypes and behavioral clichés. Use all kinds of interactive teaching methods which often imply the use of information technologies. Discussions, problem solving, projects, role plays, round tables, games, dialogues and cards can be used while learning grammar. These methods promote the ability of students to apply their grammar knowledge practically: they V create a natural situation for the application of the speech pattern, to activate the intellectual activity of the students, directed to the application of grammatical constructions in real-life situations.

In this respect a danger remains, which consists in thinking that the best practice, once known, as, for example, using computer-based testing techniques, should be imposed everywhere. It should be noted that this does not always work in the way intended. It is obvious in education that there is no ideal and superior teaching method a teacher can always use. While choosing methods of teaching grammar, teacher should take into account student's abilities, the nature of the subject matter, the time available and objectives required. And sometimes you do not need any modern equipment: "chalk and talk" suffices to provide students with practical experience and foster their learning.

▶ Use communicative situations. Practical approach to the assimilation of grammar is also very important. We teach students correct grammar usage and not grammar knowledge. Thus, the important thing is to give the students visualization, a clear example through involving them in the process of explanation (for example asking them to find additional examples) and then make them use the grammar issue studied in a real situation. Indeed a wide range of

communicative situations surrounds us while teaching and teachers should be ready to take advantage of them, trying to ask and answer genuinely communicative questions.

- ▶ Be aware of students' difficulties. It is very important to anticipate the difficulties students may have in assimilating this or that element of English grammar and choose the right ways to overcome these difficulties. One may reduce the amount of students' difficulties using different types of students' activity, finding appropriate types of exercises and their sequence, choosing suitable forms of presenting the grammar items. It should not be forgotten that students perceive information differently and teaching strategies should match various learning styles[35]. Autonomous teacher should be able to use different learning style-based teaching strategies. For example, for visual learners it is easier to perceive information from video resources than from audio-podcasts of native speakers; kinestetic (physical) learners prefer role playing games to screen-based activities.
- ► Convert and combine activities. For example, the activity based on videos or audiotapes of medical conference public addresses can be converted into an assessment by having students respond orally or in writing to questions about this video. In this type of assessment, the instructor can use a checklist to evaluate the student's use of grammar in context. This activity requires students to demonstrate their level of grammar proficiency by completing some task that students will actually need to do using the language.
- ► Use your students' interests. Being surrounded in their real life by visual data, modern students prefer tasks which are accompanied with visual support, i.e. tasks based on video resources. This is because the pictures are more visual than ordinary examples from the text, and they make the students keep the information in mind better[35]. Medical students enjoy learning grammar through the use of professionally-related tasks as well as any other tasks which touch upon their interests (music, sports, etc.). Nowadays there are a lot of on-line training programmes where grammatical tasks are demonstrated through different games. Using such kinds of games makes the student motivated to get a better result. One of the ways of reinforcing the grammar material is generating your own interactive Flash learning games. This may be done with the use of different types of Flash games generators available in the Internet, as, for instance, Hoop Shoot generator. The latter allows creating grammar activities based on multiple-choice questions and offers a one player, two players and time challenge options (http://www.contentgenerator.net/hoopshoot/default.shtml).
- ▶ Use different sources of information for developing grammar activities. Teachers should be able to find or create new grammar activities using different sources of information. One of the main sources of information for preparing grammar lessons is the Internet. Here we can find a lot of ideas to materialize. Technology, especially the Internet, presents us with new opportunities for authentic grammar tasks, as well as access to different types of ready-made materials for English language teaching (ELT).

Autonomous teachers should be able to supplement

ready-made ELT materials when necessary as well as to create new tasks and materials. Creating a collection of worksheets and activities will allow the teacher to intensify his teaching through making it more relevant for different teaching contexts and more available and attractive for different types of students.

- ▶ Use a multidisciplinary approach. This approach means choosing those exercises which allow not only developing students' grammar skills but also ground them in their field of study. In Russian medical universities English seems to be a unique discipline which allows the teacher to choose the content of the study materials. It makes possible that medical students study English based on a wide range of different problem-oriented social, cultural, medical science and healthcare issues. Touching upon medical students' personal and professional interests, this approach stimulates the development of students' generic competences (including autonomy), necessary for any medical professional.
- ► Choose useful websites and CD-ROMs. This issue is closely related to the previous one for there are now a wide range of websites and teachers have to evaluate how useful and appropriate they are for the classroom. For this you will need to think about the aims and objectives of your lesson. Does the website you have found fit in with these and does it correspond with the other materials and activities you have planned for the class? Dudney and Hockly propose several standard criteria for judging websites and CD-ROMs. According to Dudney and Hockly, for websites these criteria include accuracy (Is the content reliable?), currency (Is the content up-to-date?), content (Is the site interesting, stimulating and easy to navigate?), and functionality (Does the site work well?)[8: 34]. The authors also provide a wide range of questions for evaluating CD-ROMs which allow teachers to consider CD-ROMs' quality (multimedia content, feedback), content (suitable for professional, cultural context and students' linguistic level) and functionality (able to be used for various learner activities)[8: 116].
- ► Choose the appropriate grammar exercise. Textbooks usually provide three types of grammar exercises: mechanical drills, meaningful drills and communicative drills[25]. It is very important that foreign language teachers make the right choice keeping in mind the following characteristics of these types of grammar exercises:
- (1) Mechanical drills are necessary because they V automatize the use of manipulative patterns though they are the least useful as they are not connected with the real communication[25].
- (2) Meaningful drills, like mechanical ones, are also controlled and have one right or wrong answer but the question can not be answered unless it is understood[36: 405].
- (3) Communicative drills force students to supply information that is not known prior to the drill. Thus in a communicative drill there is no right or wrong answer except in terms of grammatical well formedness [36: 406]. The goal of a communicative drill is "normal speech for

communication or, if one prefers, the free transfer of learned language patterns to appropriate situations" [25: 9].

► Develop students' analytical and predicting skills through conscious approach to the teaching of grammar. Critical thinking and analytical skills include the abilities to identify the components of a concept or problem, identify appropriate criteria for judging a product or idea, compare and contrast concepts or processes, classify or organize elements along specified criteria[22]. According to Rogova, conscious approach to the teaching of grammar means that in sentence patterns teaching points are determined so that students can concentrate their attention on some elements of the pattern to be able to use them as orienting points when speaking or writing the target language. For example, I can see a student in the auditorium. I can see many students in the auditorium. The nurse asked for your telephone number. The nurse was asked for your telephone number. The teacher should draw students' attention to the new element in the sentence pattern. The teaching point may be presented in the form of a rule, a very short one. As Rogova suggests, it may be done in the mother tongue and this rule helps the learner to understand and to assimilate the structural meaning of the elements. It ensures a conscious approach to learning[28: 139]. Furthermore by applying this approach we can provide favourable conditions for the speedy development of correct and more flexible language use. But it does not mean that the teacher should ask students to say this or that rule. The teacher takes into account that rules do not ensure the mastery of the language, they can only V attain the practical goal. If a student can recognize and correctly use the forms that are appropriate, that is sufficient. When the learner can give ample proof of these abilities we may say that he has fulfilled the syllabus requirements. Conscious learning is also ensured when a grammar item is contrasted with another grammar item which is usually confused[28]. The contrast is brought out through oppositions. Ex.: He has come. He came an hour ago. The present perfect is contrasted with the past

Rogova insists on realizing the difficulties that the sentence pattern presents for the students. She believes that comparative analysis of the grammar item in English and in Russian or within the English language may be helpful[28: 140]. Applying the theory into classroompractice the teacher uses the shortest and simplest way for presentation of the new grammar item. It is logical to speak less about the language and to leave more time for practice. If the teacher gives more information than is necessary, it does not help the students in the usage of this particular grammar item, only hinders them.

The teacher should also remember that verb tense and aspect, sentence length and structure, and discourse patterns may contribute to the distinctive profile of a given communication type. For example, for medical students it's important to explain some special patterns which may be used in a medical case description or in a scientific paper in English. Knowing these patterns, students will be able to anticipate the forms and structures they will encounter in a

given communication task.

- ▶ Use different approaches to the teaching of active and passive grammar. Different approaches should be used to the teaching of active and passive grammar. Students need passive grammar for reading and comprehension of the text and active grammar is needed for the conversation. Passive grammar is taught through reading and writing. Students may copy the sentences out of the text; underline the elements which signal the necessary tense, voice and so on. Active grammar may be taught through the use of different communicative drills. And autonomous teacher should be able to put into practice a rich and varied repertoire of ideas in this respect.
- ► Communicate and do not be afraid of sharing your experience with your colleagues. Taking part in professional discussions, communicating and sharing your experience with your colleagues will help you to assess the results of your work, to analyze them and to find new ways for improvement. Teachers also can use a lot of Internet sites for sharing their experience and finding something new for their lessons. They can also join free online teacher development groups, as, for example, Busy Teacher (http://busyteacher.org/). The teacher can find a lot of worksheets relating to comparisons and other grammar issues. It is also possible to create a worksheet of your own and then upload it so that other teachers can learn from you.

4. Conclusions & Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to reveal the pedagogical potential of perceived teacher autonomy development in enhancing English grammar teaching in a context of today's transformations in Russian higher education. This goal was achieved by surveying a sample of students and teachers from Krasnoyarsk universities. These students' and teachers' perceptions and judgments together with the results of the review of the literature and the authors' observations on the process of English grammar teaching are the basis of our overall findings that improving effective English grammar teaching is linked to the development of perceived university teacher autonomy.

Autonomous teachers can successfully combine traditional and innovative teaching methods, support the interest and motivation of students to the subject, see the opportunities provided by real-life situations, understand advantages and disadvantages of different teaching methods, choose the right method for a particular educational context, capitalize on his own strengths and minimize his weaknesses, understand how students learn efficiently to promote optimal learning. From this consideration it becomes obvious to come to the conclusion that while teaching English grammar much depends on perceived teacher autonomy.

Implications for future research are based on the conclusion that improving English grammar teaching is hardly possible by only changing grammar textbooks, and should be based on ensuring perceived university teacher

autonomy through studying the potential of a teacher's (e.g. the relationships between teachers' perceptions of their autonomy and university context, teachers' personality (e.g. such teacher personality attributes as professional responsibility, creativity) and changing teachers' professional behavior, developing such work-related competencies as ability to the goal setting, to decision making, to make choices and being pedagogically mindful.

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