
Summary

In this article, Dashwood and Smith (2012) present a comprehensive review of the literature on the impact of technology on language learning. They analyze various studies that have explored the effectiveness of different technological tools and methods in enhancing language learning. The authors discuss the role of multimedia, interactive software, and online platforms in improving students’ comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall language proficiency. They also highlight the potential challenges and limitations associated with the use of technology in language education, such as the need for adequate technical support and the importance of teacher training. The review concludes with recommendations for future research and practical implications for educators, suggesting that technology should be integrated thoughtfully into language teaching strategies to optimize student engagement and learning outcomes.

As opposed to presenting rules as fixed and static, Dashwood and Smith (2012) argue that to obtain an in-depth, native-like understanding of a form, learners must be explicitly taught all of the meanings associated with the form and explain reasons for its use in particular communicative contexts without resorting to a comparison to the learner’s first language (L1). They argue that instead of comparing to the L1, an extended amount of time should be spent on instilling that the dative case (or other forms, such as prepositions, prefixes, articles, etc.) is polysemous (a single form is used to express more than one meaning), and that the various meanings are not random but related to each other. Therefore, they suggest a route that includes, 1) teach the prototypical, 2) show connections between meanings, 3) have learners discover the meanings through textual examples (authentic audio, video, or written texts). Refining the understanding of each category related to the form over a semester encourages the learners to obtain a thorough, native-like usage of the form.

Apart from encouraging an understanding of the various meanings and relationships between meanings of a single form, Dashwood and Smith-Pankova (2012) argue that providing texts that include a number of tenses (such as personal narratives) allows students to become aware of the differences and how they work in relation to each other to create certain meanings. For instance, the article uses a personal narrative of the fall of the Berlin Wall as an example, which shifts between past, present, and perfekt in German, allowing students to notice and analyze the different ways the tenses are used in the narrative and for what communicative purposes. For a lesson, the authors suggestions include, 1) discuss the narrative’s communicative goals, 2) have learners identify how the tenses meet the narrative’s goals, 3) demonstrate how tenses are meaning structuring devices, 4) analyze other narratives for similar patterns, and 5) practice.
The authors conclude by stating that the learning of grammar should promote a fluid understanding of the language, and a functionalist approach, such as the one they propose encourages this type of understanding. They suggest that not only does a functionalist approach to understanding structures help learners construct a native-like proficiency, it also elevates the teacher to the status of discourse analyst and researcher. They argue that formalist approaches to learning grammar often make the study of grammar a boring and dry subject for learners, but does not have to be if the teacher adopts a rich, dynamic, functionalist approach to grammar instruction.

Critical Analysis

Liamkina and Ryshina-Pankova’s (2012) article is an important contribution to the body of theory on the teaching of grammar. It provides detailed description of pedagogical implementation of a functionalist approach that encourages the acquisition of implicit grammatical knowledge through intensive instruction. Ellis (2006) argues that intensive grammar instruction, instruction over a long, sustained period, provides opportunities for extensive practice and exposure to the structures through authentic texts, contributing to an acquisition of implicit knowledge. Although this functionalist approach to teaching the dative case and German tenses can be applied to other structures and languages, the approach, however, is too context specific, thus is lacking in language awareness. The fact that native-like usage is not always the goal in many contexts, and the approach’s sophistication, required time, and expectations of the learners is in many contexts implausible, Liamkina and Ryshina-Pankova’s approach is an idealized approach to grammar instruction.

It has been generally agreed upon by most SLA theorists that language awareness (LA) has pedagogic and effective value (Ferguson, 2002). Svalberg (2007) for instance, argues that issues related not only to the language but also to “popular ideas about language, and their effect in society, such as in the school or workplace, are important LA concerns” (p. 288). The approach presented by Liamkina and Ryshina-Pankova (2012) provides insight into how a particular type of grammar instruction can eventually lead to native-like usage of particular functions, however, in many contexts native-like proficiency is not the goal. English for Specific Purposes classes, for instance, are more concerned with specific vocabulary related to genre (Ferguson, 2002) than they are with native-like proficiency. In ESL contexts where native-like proficiency may appear to be the goal, there is also the question of what “native-proficiency” actually is and if it is appropriate to put the pressure of reaching that goal on the students.

The level of sophistication and amount of time required of the language teacher to implement this approach also limits it in terms of context. Sato and Ballinger (2012) conclude their study of language awareness by stating, “changing learner’s approaches to peer interaction activities, creating a learning culture among them, and ameliorating language awareness requires a certain amount of time and meticulous lesson plans” (p. 173). In many contexts, time plays a significant role as to how one teaches grammar. Liamkina and Ryshina-
Pankova (2012) admit that a functional framework for teaching grammar is a “long-term process of getting exposed to various grammatical patterns in a rich variety of text-type genres” (p. 274). The demands of many school’s curricula regarding grammar instruction would simply not be able to accommodate this approach. The authors also admit, “only a few teachers possess the kind of knowledge of sophisticated in-depth knowledge about the target language that is inherent in functional approaches” (p. 274), and therefore propose a change in teaching training content that teaches a functional approach.

In summary, teaching a language is very rewarding but very difficult and complex enough as it is without trying to turn teachers and students into researchers and discourse analysts. Liamkina and Ryshina-Pankova’s (2012) proposal is ground-breaking in the sense that there has not been a study about functionalist approaches that offer actual pedagogical intent, and it cannot be denied that they make a strong case for functionalist grammar teaching with using their approach. However, it may be possible somehow to use portions of their approach in combination with other approaches to reach a middle ground that could be applied to a wide range of contexts.