Password to matura 2016 series
Episode 2

Hidden depths of teaching language resources in lyceum!

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to make a real difference, in our students’ final exam results and in their state of linguistic competence as such? That’s where this article comes in.

The (mistaken) belief in quantity only

Most of us have probably heard of the “10,000 Hours Rule”, popularised by Malcolm Gladwell in his global bestseller *Outliers*, according to which we need 10,000 hours of practice to be great at something, be it sport, music or other complex skills. However, Daniel Goleman claims in his book *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* that it is not only the amount of time we devote to practising a given skill, but also the quality of that time. We can repeat the same movement in tennis or golf 10,000 times, but we will not get much better if we are not told where we make mistakes and if we do not focus on improving those mistakes. The psychologist Anders Ericsson, whom Goleman (and Gladwell before him) quotes, calls it **deliberate practice** - the kind of practice in which you do not just clock in hours, repeating certain movements or tasks automatically, but one to which you give your full concentration, and in which you are given feedback on your mistakes, guided by an expert in the field.

It seems to me that some of the major problem areas with Polish students’ lexical-grammatical competence might arise from the use of pedagogical strategies which could not be considered “deliberate practice” in the sense explained above. In view of the CKE 2015 report, students’ completing an open task (such as a gap fill) relies on their understanding a longer fragment of the text, or even combining information from different parts of the text. Students’ relatively poor results show that they lack a deeper understanding of how a text (or even a relatively complex sentence) is structured - which shows in turn a (partial) lack of **in-depth understanding** of how language resources work to create sentences and texts. It is undeniable that in some areas there is a need to use pedagogical strategies which promote certain automaticity and controlled repetition, for example when we teach English to children, or when we use controlled grammar practice activities to teach the very basics of English grammar. However, when we deal with older teenagers and adults who are not beginners any more, and whose exposure to English in our classroom is very limited (2-4 hours a week), we need to rely on some forms of **modified deliberate practice** if we want to turn our students into reflective, language- and exam-conscious learners.

As always, the question is how. In this article I’ll argue that the key aspects for this kind of practice are:

- **deep processing**
- **variety**
- **engagement**
- **raising language awareness**.

Two sides of the same coin: when vocabulary and grammar come together (and when they don’t)

At first glance it looks obvious that vocabulary and grammar are tested together in **matura**, in one section called “Use of English”. The same is true of most (if not all) internationally recognised exams. Thus, it might seem illogical to stick to the long tradition of teaching and learning vocabulary and grammar separately, in different sections of a coursebook, and in different lessons, and go along with some authors’ claims that language consists not of grammar and vocabulary, but rather “grammaticalised lexis” (for example, Lewis 1993, 1997, Thornbury 2001).

Well... yes and no. Yes, the section is called Use of English, but if you take a closer look it becomes obvious that certain tasks rely more heavily (or solely) on grammar (e.g. open close tasks), while others tend to rely more on the knowledge of vocabulary (e.g. word formation). Even in a multiple choice task, seemingly testing both, the fact of the matter is that some points in the task test the knowledge of grammar while some others - of vocabulary. In fact, there are only two **matura tasks which require both at the same time**, that is - students may need to combine their lexical and grammatical competences to be able to complete one item. The two task types are: completing sentences with prompts (so-called “gramatykalizacja”) and partial translation.

Thus, it looks like sticking to the old ways - some of the time, especially at lower levels - seems like a good idea. Deliberate practice means that we, as teachers, choose when to work on grammar and vocabulary separately, when there is a need to make a more in-depth analysis of a grammatical structure and when to recycle vocabulary items in various ways, and when it might be necessary for students to use both their knowledge of grammar and lexical competence (often going beyond
the knowledge of single words). We will now take a look at how deliberate practice might look in developing lexical and then grammatical competence, and then we will look at the task when they indeed come together.

Words, words, words
-go in the deep and emotional

Acquiring lexical competence is a lifelong process, as there are always new words, new senses and new collocations to learn. Some researchers, for example Schmitt (2000), claim that when it comes to learning vocabulary, an essential problem is the number of repetitions. Students do not need fancy exercises and time-consuming activities, as long as they recycle the words they are to learn. However, automatic and mindless repetitions won’t do the job: the lexical exercises need to be varied and make students use their imagination. Thornbury (2002) calls it the “principle of cognitive depth”: we remember those items more easily and deeply which have been processed in a number of different ways. A good example of an activity which requires cognitive processing is presented below:

- Divide the adjectives into positive, negative or neutral. Write the answers in your notebook.

  hard-working dishonest talkative silly quiet
  helpful friendly kind rude serious clever
  lazy shy nasty modest polite mean

Source: Password 1 Student’s Book, p. 4 (Macmillan 2015)

In this task, students not only have to complete a categorisation task, but they also get involved emotionally (my personal teaching experience shows that teenagers’ opinions on whether being serious or modest is a positive, negative or neutral trait are not that predictable). This sort of engagement is a key aspect of teaching lexical competence: when students are able to present their personal opinions no matter how controversial or different from others they may be, a better learning event occurs (Jensen 1998).

Bring on variety!

As a process of mental classification, categorization by its very nature involves a certain degree of deep (cognitive) processing and is one of the most powerful activities to recycle vocabulary. There are a number of short categorisation activities which can be used with any group of words. For example, in “The Rule of 3”, students have to divide the words into the following three groups:

- words which I will definitely use in the future, words which I may use in the future, and words I will definitely not use in the nearest future;
- words I already know well, words I vaguely remember, and words which I need to learn;
- words with easy pronunciation/spelling, words whose pronunciation/spelling may be a problem for me, and words whose pronunciation/spelling I will never learn.

The last category (“words whose pronunciation/spelling I will never learn”), paradoxically, brings the opposite effect: the very acts of (a) choosing a few words out of a larger group, (b) writing them down and (c) discussing them with a partner, make those particular words more salient in students’ memory, and thus they get remembered longer and better.

It is also an interesting exercise to ask students to work in small groups of 3-4 and ask them to divide a set of words into any 3 groups that are logical and make sense. (It is also a useful idea for revision, especially if we want the students to refer to wordlists). For the vocabulary field “Furniture” one of the groups I used to teach came up with the following categories:

- items made of wood / plastic / something else;
- items which are most important / less important / not important at all;
- items characteristic for a living room / bedroom / kitchen;
- items for studying / resting / cooking and eating.
In my extensive teaching experience, exercises of this sort have the added benefit of exposing any gaps in students’ lexical competence, typically unacknowledged by the students themselves...

Are they aware of how many words they (don’t) know ...?

Our students often nod their heads when we ask them “Do you know the word diet?”, but the truth is that the higher the level at which our students are, the more complicated the matter becomes, as students learn that one word can have quite a few different senses in different contexts, and we no longer deal with understanding and use of single words, but with lexical chunks of all kinds - collocations, phrasal verbs, fixed phrases, idioms - chunks which often express a clearly defined pragmatic function (Lewis 1993, Nattinger and DeCarico 1992). It should become part of our everyday teaching practice to draw students’ attention to those aspects of learning vocabulary, as in the exercise below:

1. Work in pairs. What do the words in bold mean in each sentence?

1. a. He won another cup in tennis.
   b. She’d like a cup of tea.

2. a. Helen’s on a diet.
   b. Mark has a healthy diet.

3. a. Tea is my favourite meal.
   b. I drink a lot of tea every day.

4. a. This recipe for spinach pancakes is very simple.
   b. Your bad behaviour is a recipe for disaster.

Comparing different senses of the same word, different grammatical uses and different collocations it enters is an essential activity to make students better and more reflexive users of English; becoming more conscious of language processes is part and parcel of deliberate practice that I recommended at the outset. We are now going to move on to discuss this concept with reference to grammatical competence.

Knowledge or skill?

As described by CEFR, grammatical competence may be defined as “knowledge of, and ability to use, the grammatical resources of a language” (Council of Europe 2014: 112). As we all know, however, the declarative knowledge of grammatical structures, and the ability to use them, are two different things. I am convinced that we all know students who think they are good at grammar (rules), and who often complain that they “have already done the present perfect” and they “don’t want to do it again”, but in fact are not so good when it comes to using the present perfect in open close or translation tasks, not to mention productive tasks, that is speaking and writing. Thus, we need to look for ways which will help our students develop their grammatical competence in such a way that it is not a collection of meaningless grammatical rules, but tools to use consciously to express themselves.

Conscious users of grammar

Thornbury (2001) argues that grammatical competence does not develop in a predictable, linear way - quite the contrary, the growth of grammatical competence is often chaotic, and difficult to predict. That is because grammar is an emergent phenomenon: it is not a collection of facts, but it emerges in our students’
pattern-hungry brains when they are given enough exposure, that is meaningful, relevant examples with a given target structure. Thornbury (2001) claims that language learning involves conscious processes, and one of the key skills that students should be taught is noticing, that is paying attention to the linguistic input they are exposed to, and comparing the new information with what they already know, as they must be able to see the difference between the new and the old structure not only in terms of form, but first of all - meaning. To make the new structure meaningful, it must be presented in a wider context, as in the examples below:

To become conscious, reflective language learners, our students must know that grammar is about making choices - by choosing one grammatical structure rather than another one, they choose the meaning they want to express, and the difference between two grammatical structures is in fact a semantic difference, that is, a difference in meaning:

The more students are made to think about grammar they are learning to use and about the choices they are making, the more in-depth their understanding is going to be in the long run.

Grammar is not built in a day - the deep and the engaged again

Another important point made by Thornbury (2001) - and one which I have found truly valid in my teaching experience - is that students cannot realistically be expected to use the target grammatical structure too soon. It is now obvious from all kinds of research that the grammatical system needs time to absorb new information (for example, the past perfect tense construction) and to reorganise itself. That is why students need to be given a lot of opportunities to practise the new structure in semi-controlled conditions, without the pressure of producing something completely new. They need to be given time and space to think and use the new structure in a conscious, careful way, in a variety of different kinds of activities, which will engage students emotionally and/or cognitively.

An activity which does make students more conscious users of L2 and requires that they make informed choices, as discussed by Grzegorz Śpiewak (2015), is partial translation: students are made to notice the differences (and similarities) between the two languages in a direct and explicit way, and, by proposing different options, give you feedback on how well they understand L2 grammatical structures. You can then decide whether the students need some more work on a particular structure, for example the past perfect:

Grammar challenge!

Translate the Polish parts of the sentences into English.

1. When the police inspector (przyjechał), the murderer (już uciekł).
2. Lena locked the door and noticed she (zostawiła) her wallet inside.
3. When the woman came home, she (zadzwoniła) the police. Someone (wymyślił się) her house.
4. Nobody knew where Paul (poznał), so naturally they were worried about him.
5. Mark and Kate (byli para) for three years, so we weren’t surprised when they (zdecydowali się) to get married.

As Thornbury (2001) puts it, interaction should be meaning-driven; it should not be practice
of grammatical forms only. It should **engage** students by letting them express their personal meanings, not just manipulating meaningless forms:

When we want students to start producing their own messages with the target structure, one of the best ways of doing so is to let them first write what they are going to say with the use of the new structure, and then have them say that to their partner, whether it is a dialogue or a story, as in the task below:

To sum up, (guided) deliberate practice means that we as teachers choose the time and the place when we want our students to focus on grammar, when - on vocabulary, and when we feel there is a need to combine both.

**Come together, right now**

It goes without saying that whatever we do in the upper-secondary classroom, we always have the *matura* exam in mind. I have already mentioned that the two tasks in the Use of English section of the extended level exam which I find particularly useful for deep recycling of both grammar and vocabulary are (1) completing sentences with prompts that was mentioned above and (2) partial translation, discussed in detail by Grzegorz Śpiewak (2015). Completing sentences is the task in which Polish students got the lowest result in 2015 extended *matura* in English (a highly disappointing 34% on average). The students had problems with grammatical structures such as *used to* and *learn something by heart*. They often lost points not because they did not know a given structure, but because they used articles or prepositions wrongly, or they spelled a word incorrectly.

Completing sentences requires that students use both their grammatical and lexical competence at the same time, that they are really careful and focused not to make mistakes either in the use of a given structure, word or phrase, or their spelling, and that they do not feel tempted to look for a solution which might seem obvious in Polish, but is in fact wrong. Below is an exercise which focuses on one grammatical aspect (comparative and superlative forms of adjectives):

There are three kinds of difficulties students face in this kind of task:

- they have to decide whether to use the prompts unchanged and if not - what grammatical form they need them in;
- they need to decide what words are missing and where they should be placed; these will typically be grammar words, like articles, but also prepositions, which are often parts of fixed phrases (like *learn by heart*) or idioms;
- they need to write all the words correctly without any spelling mistakes.

As completing sentences with prompts requires a lot of deep processing, it should be done as often as possible, for example as a revision or warm-up activity. We can write a number of prompts on the board, have students work on the sentence(s) in pairs, then exchange their ideas with another pair, and finally write
down different answers on board, discussing possible options. I am also a firm believer in students writing activities for other students, as this is a really effective way of processing both the grammatical and lexical knowledge. Thus, students can be told to write three or four examples for their classmates to complete - on condition that every sentence focuses on a different grammatical structure and a different vocabulary field. Such a cumulative grammar task is extremely beneficial for students as they need to retrieve different kinds of information from their memory, rather than focus on one structure only (Brown, Roediger, McDaniel 2014). In fact, some researchers claim that writing tasks for classmates is a much better way of revising and recycling the target language than actually doing those tasks (cf. Żylińska 2013) - it is in fact a case of deliberate practice at its best.

Summary
The Indian writer Tagore said that depth of friendship does not depend on length of acquaintance. It is similar to acquiring lexical-grammatical competence: while it is always a long process, it is not necessarily effective. The quantity of activities aimed at practising lexical and grammatical competences, and the amount of time devoted to them, do not always produce fluent users of those competences. One might hold that it’s a good idea to start working on exam tasks pretty early on, in the belief that that’s what the future exam will look like, and that is a good approach for our students, no matter how deep their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is. However, I do believe that - especially at lower levels - students need a lot of time and opportunities to focus on the two competences separately: they need solid background of vocabulary and grammar in order to approach the Use of English tasks with care and attention. My teaching experience, confirmed by neuro-scientific research, shows that the key to mastering both lexical and grammatical competence is deep processing of the target language, with students being engaged and focused, both emotionally and cognitively, by doing a variety of tasks - some of them more focused on vocabulary, and some - on grammar. The more advanced our students are, the more frequently they will face activities when the two competencies become one. This line of thinking may sometimes be hidden from our sight, but I am personally convinced that only such an approach can lead to our students’ success in becoming fluent and conscious users of English, both in their exams and in everyday use of English outside the classroom.

References:
Nattinger, J. and DeCarico, J. (1993) Lexical phrase and language teaching. OUP