

TEACHING AND PRACTISING GRAMMAR IN A DIGITAL ELT COURSE MATERIAL FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS¹

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with how an abstract domain of language knowledge, grammar is presented and treated in a digital English course material for 4-8 class primary school students developed in the cooperation of Miskolc University and KIFÜ (Governmental Information-Technology Development Agency) within the framework of the Complex Instruction Program (Hungarian abbreviation: KIP) [1]. Sample tasks of the material prepared are currently made electronically available by the University of Miskolc in an interactive form on the Moodle platform. The complete units themselves may also be downloaded in .pdf format. The project relied on the fact that the use of the Internet offers a lot of opportunities for language learners to practise, use and extend their knowledge outside classroom contexts and makes it possible to draw on a vast variety of resources, and thus expose students to the language they are learning in an extensive and varied way.

As a framework, the Complex Instruction Program [1 Introduction, 3, 4] offers solutions to the problem of coping with classes consisting of students with heterogeneous abilities, students coming from socially disadvantaged families, minority students having problems with the language of instruction or speaking Hungarian as a second language, and students with special educational needs (e.g. dyslexics [5]). Even if the family itself is so poor that they do not even have electricity in their house, through its facilities, the school can provide the children coming from such a family access to the vast realm of Internet resources. The extensive use of cooperation-based groupwork gives an opportunity to make valuable contributions and profit from peer discussion for those students, too, who would otherwise never be able to or would never dare to give answers in the traditional way, before the whole class. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the grammar-oriented tasks of the material reflect these objectives and help achieve them, and how such an abstract domain of knowledge can be fitted into the KIP framework. Aspects considered to be of key importance are printed in italics in the text.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE MATERIAL

To provide for flexibility and take into account individual study paths and routes of progress, the levels of the course material are not strictly matched to traditional class division but every level covers two classes of the 8-grade Hungarian

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primary school (4-5, 5-6, 6-7, 7-8). The time required for solving the tasks increases progressively as you move on to higher levels. The material is not based on one particular textbook but can be used as auxiliary material together with the course material.

Each level covers 10 topics, and every topic is divided into 7 modules in a uniform structure. The first module introduces the topic with picture description or a video task and presents key vocabulary. Modules 2-5 then explore the topic in detail from different aspects, providing varied tasks with the integration of the development of the four skills. Module 6 is for revision and Module 7 gives a test on the topic. Each module includes tasks of three different levels of difficulty, which is indicated with an icon, the number of smiling faces at the beginning of the task. This makes it possible for the teacher (and the student) to choose from among them according to the current stage of progress of the class, group or the individual.

THE PLACE OF GRAMMAR IN THE COURSE MATERIAL

In order to provide motivation for learning, the most abstract domain of language, that is, grammar, is practically never taught in a decontextualized form but is integrated into the topic areas. In general, grammar explanations are restricted to a minimum, use only the basic terminology and rely on the involvement of the mother tongue. Task types are varied, ranging from underlining certain forms in a text through matching forms, making sentences by putting the words in the appropriate order, multiple choice and gap filling tasks to the free and creative use of structures in open-ended tasks.

The morphologically weak character of the English language makes it relatively easy to *contextualise* grammar tasks from the very beginning of the learning process. Grammar is presented in two kinds of contexts: one of them is the inner context of the material. There are three standard characters in it: two Hungarian children, Anna and Tomi, and their friend, an English girl, Kitty (the names have been consciously chosen to sound familiar in both languages), who are of the same age as the target group of instruction. They appear in the different situations. The other context is the students' own lives and experiences as they are given *open-ended tasks* in the modules to practise the use of certain structures. In the following example (Module 4, Topic 3, Class 6-7), first, the use of must/mustn't is presented in a dialogue between Anna, Kitty and Grandma, then students are asked to use these auxiliaries in giving advice to their brother/sister or friend about how to behave at school.

Example 1. Presentation of grammar in a text for reading/listening followed by an open-ended task

Kitty: What's the weather forecast for tomorrow?

Anna: It'll be sunny and warm.

Kitty: We must put on light clothes then. A T-shirt and shorts'll do.

Grandma: The shoes're very important. You'll be doing a lot of walking, I know Grandpa. You must wear comfortable trainers. You must take a pullover and a raincoat, too. It's always colder in

the woods, and the weather may change rapidly. Take your favourite baseball caps, as well. They're useful against the sun, and the branches won't catch in your hair.

Anna: We want to swim in the brook if the water isn't too cold. So we must take our swimsuits, too.

Grandma: Then, we must put in suntan lotion, as well. Don't forget to use it! You mustn't get sunburnt. And you must take a towel, as well, to get dry. We mustn't forget a blanket. You'll need something to sit on.

Anna: If we walk and swim, we'll get hungry and thirsty very soon.

Grandma: You will. We must make some sandwiches and put cold lemon tea in a thermos flask.

Kitty: I think we must take some fruit, too. It helps if you're thirsty, too. And let's take the badminton set.

Grandma: Very well, girls, and you mustn't leave this mosquito and tick repellent cream at home.



TASK 2/B. Find the sentences in the text in which Grandma, Anna and Kitty say what they must or mustn't do. **Copy** them into the box below in two groups.



TASK 4. Write some advice for a younger sister/brother or friend who is just starting school about what he/she must and mustn't do at school. **Use** the auxiliaries *must/mustn't* as in the example. **Try to write** five sentences with both words. **Write** in the box below.

It is a powerful method of contextualisation, attracting students to grammar when they can practise a structure with popular celebrities, for example, when they are encouraged to use the Present Progressive with Mr Bean in a cartoon (Module 7, Topic 2, Class 6-7).²

As the presentation of grammar is contextualised and depends on the features of the actual topic discussed, some grammatical problems recur in the material in the different modules at different levels, thus giving an opportunity for revision or making up for deficiencies. For example, the above grammar problem, the use of *must/mustn't* first comes up in Class 5-6 in relation to Topic 10 (Budapest), where students have to make sentences explaining the meaning of different pictograms that tourists often see when they do sightseeing (Module 3). Then, it comes up again in Topic 3, in Class 6-7 (Life in the country – Module 6: how to behave in natural parks) and in Topic 3, in Class 7-8 (Travelling – Module 3: what are the rules you have to adhere to if you rent bikes).

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTeGorY3rg4>

FEATURES IN THE WAYS OF THE PRESENTATION OF GRAMMAR IN THE STUDY MATERIAL FACILITATING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE OBJECTIVES OF THE COMPLEX INSTRUCTION PROGRAM

In order to help learners acquire the strict English word order patterns in different sentence types, constituents are marked with different colours (*multisensory approach* [5]). The system of colour codes used in the material is shown in Figure 1.

VERB
AUXILIARY
SUBJECT
OBJECT
ADVERBIAL
MODIFIER
CONJUNCTION

Figure 1. System of colour codes

Examples of the different structures are given in this way. In the case of the above task in which students are asked to give their friend advice about how to behave in the school, it takes the following form (Figure 2).

Example 2. Use of the colour codes

YOU	MUST	DO	YOUR HOMEWORK.
YOU	MUSTN'T	SHOUT	IN CLASS.

In the following example (Task 1/C, Module 3, Topic 4, Class 7-8), the colour code helps students answer the questions and at the same time, makes them aware of the systematic differences between the word order pattern in declarative sentences and questions (Figure 3).

Example 3. Illustrating the difference between declarative and question word order with the help of the colour codes

WHAT	WERE	THE CATS	WAITING FOR?

In other cases, pictures and diagrams are used to clarify grammar concepts: in Module 4, Topic 2, Class 4-5, the different grades of the adjective *hot* are explained showing a

cup of tea, the campfire and the sun. Pictures and other visual material are also used as prompts to get students to actively produce certain structures: with the help of pictograms and traffic and other signs, they can practise the use of must/mustn't (Task 1/A, Module 3, Topic 10, Class 5-6 and Task 3, Module 7, Topic 3, Class 6-7) or with the help of photos showing different people involved in everyday activities, they are asked to make sentences in the Present Progressive (Task 3, Module 7, Topic 9, Class 6-7).

The tasks represent three *different levels of difficulty from controlled practice to the free use of different structures*. Often, the first level just involves the recognition of the relevant structures in a text and sometimes grouping them according to relevant criteria. In a series of grammar tasks on how to use the Simple Past in narratives in Topic 7 on Travelling (Task 2/B, Module 6, Class 6-7), the first level task asks students to find the verbs in Simple Past in a text on Captain Cook's first journey, and write them in two columns according to whether they are regular or irregular. Then, in the second level task, they have to put verbs in the Simple Past form on their own in a text on Captain Cook's second journey. In general, Level 2 tasks represent controlled practice, also including matching structures with appropriate contexts or with corresponding structures (e.g. active-passive pairs in Task 2/D, Module 4, Topic 5, Class 7-8), or putting words in the appropriate order to make well-formed sentences. Finally, in the third or highest level task, which usually involves free and open-ended practice, students in the above module are asked to make five questions in the Simple Past before reading about Captain Cook's third expedition, and then check if they can find answers to their own questions in the text. In another set of grammar tasks integrated with listening (Tasks 2C and 3, Module 2, Topic 1, Class 6-7), students first have to fill in a table with information from phone conversations and then make sentences in the Simple Future about how Anna and Tomi's friends will help organise a party to welcome Kitty in Hungary (Examples 4-5).

Example 4. Level 1 grouping grammar task (Module 5, Topic 2, Class 7-8)



TASK 1/C. What are you allowed and not allowed to do on a bus? **Make** two groups. **Write** the number of the sentences into the right table.



1. Be noisy.
2. Disturb other passengers.
3. Listen to music loudly.
4. Listen to music quietly.
5. Sleep.
6. Talk to your friend quietly.
7. Talk to your friend loudly.
8. Eat a hamburger.
9. Shout.
10. Read a book.

You are allowed to					
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You are not allowed to					
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Example 5. Level 2 matching grammar task (Module 7, Topic 1, Class 7-8)



TASK 2. Tomi and Anna would like to improve their English. What would you advise? Pair the problems with your advice.

	
I couldn't understand a word, because they were all new to me.	You should watch movies in English and listen to the pronunciation.
I couldn't understand a word, because the accent was strange to me.	You should read books in English and learn the vocabulary.
I couldn't express myself.	You should learn to spell.
I couldn't write an email to my friend in English, because I don't know the rules of email writing.	You should practise speaking.
I couldn't write a text to my friend, because I don't know how to spell the words.	You should learn the rules of email writing.

Furthermore, the material includes tasks designed *to raise students' awareness about forms and structures that are easily mixed up*. When students are instructed to underline the 's forms in a text and write them out in full, they are made aware that these can represent the possessive suffix, or the contracted forms of *is* or *has*, as well (Example 6).

Example 6. Raising students' awareness about forms easily mixed up



TASK 3. Count the 's forms in the following paragraph. Underline the 's which show that something belongs to somebody. Which are the forms that represent *has* and not *is*? Copy the paragraph in the box, using non-contracted forms.

Kitty's an English schoolgirl. Now, she's in Hungary, visiting her friends, Anna and Tomi. While she's in Hungary, she is staying with their family. She sleeps in Anna's room. Anna's got a quite big room with a balcony. There's enough room for Kitty's clothes in Anna's cupboard, too.

Anna's got a plan for each day of Kitty's stay so she's having a good time here. She's also good friends with Anna's dog, Áfonya.

The study material reflects the *restored status of the mother tongue* [6] in language teaching in the grammar-oriented tasks, as well. It is present in them in two ways. For the sake of clarity, the explanatory parts often involve the Hungarian language, and regularly give the Hungarian equivalents of the different structures. On the other hand, there are also tasks included with the purpose of contrasting the two languages and raising the students' awareness of problems arising from the interference of the two languages. The task in which students have to match English questions with their Hungarian equivalents (Task 1/A, Module 3, Topic 8, Class 5-6) is capable of revealing the difference between question word order in the two languages. If completed with the Hungarian translations of the sentences, a task such as Task 3, Module 6, Topic 7, Class 5-6, where students have to choose between the Simple Present and Present Progressive to complete sentences can make them aware that what is one form in one language corresponds to two in the other one.

CONCLUSION

The teaching and practising of grammar in the digital English language course developed at the University of Miskolc can support and assist achieving the objectives of the Complex Instruction Programme through being contextualised, providing the possibility of revision, having a multisensory approach, supplying the learner with tasks of different levels thus catering for individual needs and routes of progress, and relying on the mother tongue for the clarity of explanations.

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