

How course books of modern foreign languages foster communicative grammar teaching

What this research was about and why it is important

Studies in foreign language pedagogy stress that grammar teaching should not stop at ‘knowing grammar’ but should also include ‘using grammar’: presented grammar structures should be integrated into writing and speaking exercises. Since teaching materials are guiding in teaching practice, it is useful to analyze how course books present grammar and to what extent they align with research insights and are communicative in nature. In other words: do these course books foster effective grammar learning? Such analyses are especially insightful in countries which lack admission procedures and have only general curricular guidelines, that is, in countries where commercial publishing houses have a free hand in determining the content of teaching materials. This study compared Finnish, Dutch, and global course books for German as a foreign language and analyzed how much grammar was offered, how it was presented and whether grammar was integrated into productive exercises. The study showed that all teaching materials follow the rationale behind communicative language teaching. However, the course books seem ambivalent about grammar teaching. On the one hand, they are traditional, since grammar inhabits a prominent position in the books. On the other hand, they are progressive in including pedagogical innovations regarding grammar teaching.

What the researchers did

- They developed a tool to enable a systematic study of grammar presentation and practice in teaching materials. For presentation, it investigates how many grammar structures are offered and whether this was done inductively or deductively, whether in portions or as a larger unit, and where in a unit grammar is found. Concerning practice, it determines in how many exercises grammar was practiced and whether this was done in an integrated manner.
- They used the instrument to analyze four Finnish, five Dutch, and three global teaching materials for German as a foreign language. The course books aim at secondary school students who start learning German, with CEFR levels A0-A2.
- They compared the course books and determined whether the books accord with research insights and are communicative in nature.

What the researchers found

- All the course books foster communicative grammar teaching and learning.
- Many similarities exist between Finnish, Dutch, and global course books as to how grammar is presented and practiced in writing and speaking exercises.
- Striking findings in the Finnish course books were that they offer more grammar exercises and ‘at a lower speed’ than the Dutch and global materials. That is to say, a grammar structure is introduced in several smaller parts and not as a large unit.
- The course books analyzed are traditional in the sense that grammar inhabits a prominent position in the materials but especially the Finnish materials are innovative; they are learner-centered in that they help the learner in self-evaluation and spread the learning load.

Things to consider

- This study showed that the course materials analyzed generally foster grammar teaching in the context of communicative foreign language teaching. However, using the developed tool in this analysis also revealed differences between the individual textbooks, which should help both publishers and teachers to critically reflect on the materials they develop and use in teaching practice, respectively. Casting an eye over the position of grammar in course books from other countries might inspire them as well.
- Differences between course books from different countries can sometimes be related to the teaching context. This is for instance the case of the Finnish course books, which present grammar ‘at a slower pace’ than the Dutch materials. Finnish learners need more time to learn German than Dutch learners since their mother tongue is not related, that is, very different from the target language, German.
- Future research can use the tool developed in this study. The instrument can be used to analyze course books from other countries than Finland and the Netherlands and for foreign languages other than German.