EDU WORLD 2022
Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues

TEACHING FRENCH GRAMMAR ELEMENTS TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PANDEMIC

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Abstract

In this article, I will bring to the fore the teaching of French grammar in the current epidemiological context, starting from highlighting the contexts of grammar practice, observed as a linguistic phenomenon, practiced in other contexts to demonstrate the understanding and usefulness of those language elements. The classes in which the research on teaching grammar in inductive form was carried out, using online means, videos, mini-dialogues, images are those from the lower cycle of high school, ninth and tenth. We started from an initial assessment to evaluate the level of the entire class and a final assessment to see how improve the level of the students, using online technics in pandemic. The method by which the research was carried out was the method of direct observation, in the classroom, during the learning activities, of the teacher's reflective diary in which I noted the strengths, the improvement points of the approaches used in teaching grammar, and how to improve students' reaction to the learning activities proposed for contextualized and meaningful learning and also, the qualitative method, in order to see if this new context produces learning in spite of the new conditions.

Keywords: Distance learning, grammar and communication, relevant learning situations

1.   Introduction

The grammar is defined by the Dictionary of Didactic of Languages, written by Coste and Gallison in 1976, as being „the discipline that it is studies the rules of function or evolution of a language entire natural" and as „a kit of normative prescriptions looking some details and some zones of linguistic use and which plays the role of sociolinguistic discrimination" (Cuq & Gruca, 2018, p. 343).

From the grammar types: prescriptive grammar, traditional grammar, comparative grammar, lexico-grammatical, universal grammar, pedagogical grammar (Defays, 2018, pp. 55-56), we will stop to talk about the grammar in the school which can be defined as a school grammar- pedagogical/didactical grammar, as a tool for learning foreign languages, specially French as a secondary and foreign language in the high school, intermediate level.

From the point of view of the didactic, the grammar is described as being the result of the heuristic activity which allows to student to build a metalinguistic representation and a guide for the teacher about the linguistic representations of the foreign language that he teaches. (Cuq & Gruca, 2018, p. 343)

Thus, subsequent to the concept of grammar, lies the concept of context - defined by Larousse online as a set of social, natural, cultural conditions in which a statement, a discourse and the whole of a text in which an element of content is located and where acquires a meaning of use, are those situations, possible situations anticipated by the teacher, correlated with speech acts that can be corroborated and performed in the classroom either physically, or in the current context, online, in the form of role-playing games or simulations.

Role- playing it is, in spite of his playfulness aspect, a didactic strategy which has the role to produce learning, distracting the attention from the theory and accentuating the use of the language as a product of the students' imagination and giving possible situations in which could be used (Cuq & Gruca, 2018, p. 434).

2.   Problem Statement

The grammar in schools, as we see the curriculum used by the Romanian teachers in the high school to teach French as a foreign language, secondary, approved by Minister of Education with number 5099/09.09.2009, it is seen and designed as a medium to realize different communication activities and to practice some language acts, used to functional adaptation in context of communication.

It is known that the grammar is not seen in the school as an abstract notion, but the grammar it is the element that facilitates the construction of different communication situations, which it gives coherence to each communication situation in which it is used.

The grammar elements are used as anchors in different types of communicational contexts, adequate and relevant for the teenager from the high school, lower cycle, subsumed to a thematic and to speaking terms specific and in direct relation with those particularities of the age.

Grammar elements presented in the curriculum for French as foreign language could be correlated in this way:

To 10th grade, the grammar contents, written in the curriculum for French language as foreign language, are presented in such a way to fulfil the correlation with the speaking terms that could be

practiced in different situations (Bourguignon, 2014, p. 46): examples- *speaking terms- presenting itself/the classmates/the environment, demanding/offering practical information's about persons, objects, places and actions-* can be associated with grammar contents as *the article and the noun- defined and undefined article- situations of replacement of partitive article, the adjective- the grade adjective: the agreement and the degrees of comparison, possessive and demonstrative adjective and the verb- present at indicative mood.*

By doing an association like that could produce a coherent learning by using grammar in contexts. First of all we are using grammar structures without knowing all about theory and after using them in different situations of learning, we observe why we used them in that/those context (s) and we have conclusions about the theory regarding different parts of speech.

As a recipe, the teacher has to give to students that appropriate situations of learning which would include those grammar elements and would develop in such a way that it finds its usefulness and relevance in a conscientious- we know how to use and why to use a grammar element in different contexts of communication- and coherent learning of a foreign language as it is French language (Roussel, 2021, p. 103).

3.   Research Questions

At the end of two years of studying French as a foreign language in the lower grade of high school the level of linguistic performance it is B1 for comprehension documents oral and written, A2 for speaking, interaction. The actual curriculum for foreign languages have as an inspiration point the documents of linguistic policies of Europe Council which it is represented by the European Framework of Reference for Languages, which places the grammar as a way to help the comprehension and the production of messages in different life contexts and also in different learning situations.

The grammar competence is the capacity of understanding and expressing senses, by producing and recognizing sentences very well formulated as the theory says and not memorizing them and reformulating them such as formulas predefined. In this way, each language has a grammar enough complex which it can't, today, be the object of a comprehensive and permanently treatment in real life contexts (Narcy-Combes & Narcy- Combes, 2019, p. 125).

These elements have to be related with the actual context of pandemic in which teachers have to use digital area in order to connect with the students and continue the education process.

We know that the distance learning meaning it is that the students and the teacher don't reunite face-to-face and they and to maintain virtual communication and cooperation in order to continue the learning process.

Distance teaching and learning process is composed by two parts: an on-line part and an off-line part. In the on-line part, the teacher reunites with the students through different platforms (zoom, meet Goole, team link, microsoft365 etc.) in videoconference and they participate to relevant activities as in the real class, but now the class become a virtual one. In the off-line part, the teacher guides students to access platforms of practicing what they have learned in on-line classes and also they maintain connectivity through social media as WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups. They share on this social media their own research and solutions for topics proposed by teacher.

Teaching foreign language in pandemic (The World Bank, 2020), on virtual meeting is very useful because we offer to our student's possibility to access and to develop their all competences: comprehension, expression, interaction and mediation. They also can create projects using different applications and platforms. What is missing for the learning process: the real interaction and emotional senses, because we can't observe how they feel the other when he/she participate to a dialogue.

So appeared a question for me as a French teacher: How to determine students to continue seeing the use of grammar in different contexts and especially of a foreign language as it is French language, passed a secondary language in Romanian curriculum and less practiced than English, a global language as well?

It wasn't so difficult, because this way of communication arrived with a good thing regarding the use of all digitals resources, animations and digital platforms in real time and adapted to students' needs in learning.

We started the research process from a question: a new way of working/of teaching could continue the personalized didactic process regarding the intuition of language elements, of their contextualized use and diversified and finally to extract the rules?

Research hypothesis: If the students will be trained, involved in relevant learning situations to practice language facts, online, by using different digital platforms, exercises, online activities, their communication competences will improve.

Research methods: direct observation of the students in learning process, qualitative method of the results and the reflexive journal of the teacher.

4. Purpose of the Study

We have the theoretical frames, but we change the context of teaching. If we used to work with the students in the class until the last year, 2020, face-to-face, nowadays the real class has been replaced with the virtual classroom, seeing the fact of the lockdown situation, alert situation produced by the pandemic of the SARS-COV2. So, us, the teachers, we were in a situation that determined us to change our teaching style, or to adapt our teaching style to this new way of learning of our students by using new technology, by using the system of teaching through virtual conferences in different platforms.

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5. Research Methods

Our target public was formed by students from the 10th form, a group of 28 students whom are studying French language as foreign language, the sixth year of study.

Research methods: direct observation of the students in learning process, qualitative method of the results and the reflexive journal of the teacher.

We started our research by using an online initial assessment, in order to establish from what level we begin and a summative assessment in order to see the progress of students' learning.

First of the research methods regarded the teacher direct observation "under the magnifying glass" of students activity in different contexts, learning situations proposed by the teacher and which had as purpose the use of concepts or grammar elements in an intuitive way. The criteria were defined in terms of *well/very well/excellent* synchronized with each type of activity.

The second research method, reflexive journal of the teacher was used on one hand as a method of keeping account the benefits of each learning activity according with the aims of each teaching sequence and with the performance of each student, on the other hand keeping account the points that should be improved and in which the students didn't perform so well.

The research took place in the period November 2020- January 2021 and we choose as platforms to access: www.kahoot.it , www.mentimeter.com and www.wordwall.net.

We choose to see how it works the same teaching way which begins from a practical part to abstract the theory but using a digital platform to do that and to present the relevance of grammar elements as a way to learn a foreign language, and especially French language.

The teaching method concerned that the virtual classroom has to produce the same learning and to have the same relevance for the student. As well each activity was projected from the concept of the student universe approach, trying to give a daily note to each learning activity, following the advices from the curriculum for French language, designed by the Ministry of Education.

Examples:

"Si conditional"- why? How can be used? We want to create contexts of expressing desires, plans, to make conditions, real or possible. We support the students to discover the relevance of SI conditional by using photos, videos and dialogues for role playing that could be played by themselves in the real life.

Another activity was that regarding the daily activities-routine: The teenagers and their life. How it is and how could it be? We do a list of daily activities and I take care to accomplish them. We do power point presentations about how could we eat to a healthy life vegan or not and we present also and describe the pyramid of aliments. I express all about this thing by using the present, activities that happen each day for us.

We are in the last week of school before Christmas holidays and we want to go somewhere so we do plans. We make small groups of students and we propose role playing activities and dialogues,

constructing questions and answers. In this activity we used the future simple to present activities in the future

We came back from the holidays, and now we present for the others our memories or experiences and we use the past simple tense and the imperfect.

Besides this activities of speaking and writing, it was realized also activities of reading and comprehension of oral and written documents.

The texts chosen respected the thematic proposed by the curriculum for French language, studied in Romanian schools as a secondary foreign language and it's were used step by step starting with texts from the near universe of the students and continuing with texts that regarded the environment and the teenager in contact with the society. We used a variety of texts and lyrics.

On the digital platforms written above, we created exercises and activities to practice and develop the linguistic competences indirectly: in *WordWall* we created *canvas* exercises, association exercises, rearrangement exercises of words to give sense to sentences and to prove the comprehension of a written or listen text, and in *Mentimeter* we realized exercises designed with the purpose to create curiosity for the students and to make them imagine situations and to give us solutions from each one point of view, and in this platform the image was the main „character", as a pretext for a real learning way.

They did not produce the best dialogue, they did not realize the best compositions or interactions, but they learned to communicate, and the error was not identified to be pointed, but to be fixed and to give them a positive feedback.
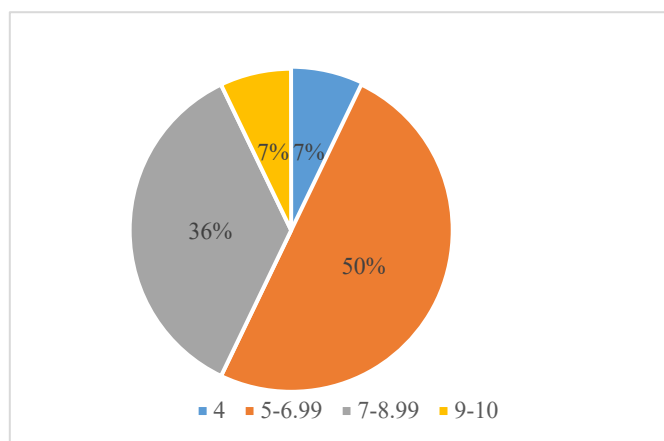
6. Findings

Figure 1. Initial assessment- results

First activity was the initial assessment (see Figure 1. Initial assessment- results) to see the level of our students involved in research.

As can we see in the chart above, the distribution of the notes is very different: 2 of them have obtained less than 4 points, 14 of them have obtained between 5-6.99 points, 10 students have obtained between 7-8.99 points and 2 of them obtained between 9-10 points.

The activities above presented were presented in a virtual way and they supposed the association image-texts, parts of texts, thus the student learn to communicate oral or written in French. The didactic

approach did not started from the theory to practice, it started from learning situations by using videos, images, dialogues, intuitive use of concepts and finally we have made a *grammatical stop* in that context where we needed it, to create a natural didactical approach.

The two research methods reunited in the reflexive journal of the teacher. Here we wrote the activity of learning and teaching regarding the students, their reactions, strengths and the opportunities for the next learning activities. The students can understand an oral or written message no matter the topic, regarding the curriculum, they can participate to short dialogues and they can create sentences reduced as dimension, but which has coherence and make sense in the communication.

They can extract rules of using grammar tools, but not entirely, being necessary the teacher support to realize some tasks (Bouhechiche, 2021, p. 120)- for example if we give them as a task to realize some narrative compositions in the future, we have to give them a list of irregular verbs form radical of future in French. We never forgot about the reflective moment in the lesson: Why? Because it is very important to see if the students understand what happened in the class and why we did that thing.

The reflexion moment proved that over 50% of students from the class in which we developed the research understand the approach and the purpose of each activity.

At the end of the first semester, in January, we had an online session on zoom and we debated all this things with each student from this class, so each one could present what he or she has learned in this time and more than that, why.

In this moment of our research, we applied also a summative assessment (see Figure 2. Summative assessment- results) to see in which percentage the level of the target group improved by using online contexts and activities in order to develop competences.
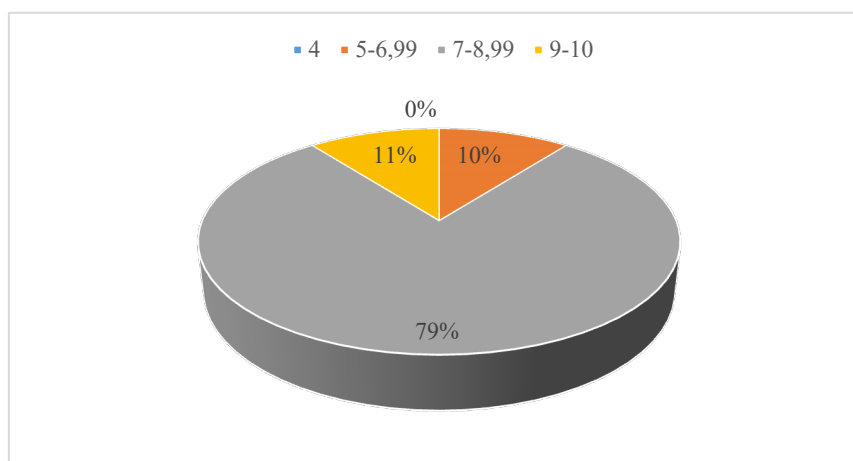

Figure 2. Summative assessment- results

By the target group of students involved in the research, after a systematically observation of their implication in each French virtual lesson, we had as a result that 14 students were actively participated to each lesson, 8 still need support to solve tasks, 6 don't know yet how to access very well a platform and see the solutions for each activity proposed by the teacher.

7. Conclusions

Always, as a teacher, we must have the lesson prepared in line with students' expectations and needs. We do not teach to be teachers, but we teach to support our students in learning.

Online or offline learning and teaching, it is about how we can make our students have an active participation in each French class and to learn from each activity and in the same time to develop the competences previewed by the curriculum from each level.

Online teaching and learning offered the frame of a system in which the students could have a quick access to information in the same time with the teacher and to use it in relevant contexts and different situations.

In conclusion, using virtual spaces and classroom did not create a break up in the educational communication, but facilitated it and made it stronger from the point of view of foreign languages teaching and learning, and especially of the point of view of French language.

Teacher is the same, students are the same, only context is another. We adapt our teaching methods in order to adapt to new challenge which is defined by virtual education and to find better way to make students to develop their competences written in the curriculum for the foreign language learning.

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