

Textbook: Focus on Students' National Identity

Workbook as Tool for Motivating Students to Study Grammar

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Abstract

The problem of the quality of textbooks and workbooks has always been relevant. Their making is always a rather difficult and time-consuming task. It is important to understand that the textbook and workbook are a single unit within the complex systemic whole, encompassing also subject concepts, federal state educational standards, basic educational programs, etc. The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze the “Conjuguer: c'est facile” (2015, 2016, 2017) series of author's French grammar workbooks for beginners. Using this example, the authors of the article emphasize that well-written and appropriately compiled teaching resources stimulate the cognitive activity of students, turning the process of mastering a foreign language in general, and its grammar, in particular, into an entertaining experience. The main approach to the study of the problem is a systemic one. Despite all the variety of various materials, teachers are encouraged to create their own teaching aids tailored to the specific kind of their audience, as well as to their specific needs. The authors come to the conclusion that the effectiveness of a textbook on French grammar depends on a number of criteria, including careful selection of material for the formation of linguistic, speech, socio-cultural, social, discursive and compensatory (strategic) competencies; logical organization and presentation of material; inclusion of exercises implying a great degree of participation; the presence of test assignments for monitoring student's progress. In addition, a visual presentation of the material plays an important role in enhancing the cognitive activity of students, increasing their interest in mastering grammatical skills and abilities.

Keywords: workbooks, French grammar, motivation, cognitive activity.

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Introduction

As we know, workbook can be defined as a specific type of teaching resources and shall be compiled in accordance with the curriculum, and is specially designed to completely or partially replace or supplement the textbook. Having said so, we need to emphasize the fact that the *person-oriented education* is currently underlying the whole system of higher education in Russia, as well as defining its strategies. Under this system, the student's individuality is placed at the center of attention. Also, it implies that not the teaching itself, but rather students' educational and cognitive activities shall lie at the core of the subject-object-subject exchanges (Abdulmyanova, 2010, p. 38; Vikulova, & al. 2011). Consequently, the traditional model "*instructor – textbook – student*" shall give way to the reversely ordered "student – teaching resource – instructor" paradigm (Salins, 1996). It should be also noted that the question of quality of textbooks and workbooks is of utmost importance. Creating such teaching resources is a very difficult and effort-consuming task. It is important to bear in mind that textbook and workbook constitute a specific unit within the framework of a complex conceptual system (Byrd, 2001).

For a considerable period of time, we have been teaching an optional course of French as a second foreign language to beginner-level students, who made a personal commitment to invest some of their personal time and efforts into studying the new subject (Barakhta, 2015; Bokova, Malakhova, 2019; Cherkashina, 2009). It is a serious challenge for a professor to work in such setting, because they are supposed to help students with varied linguistic aptitudes to acquire the linguistic competence in a language through a very limited number of classes (in our case – two academic hours a week). For that purpose, during the period of our teaching this optional course at our university, we ourselves have published a number of workbooks in vocabulary and grammar of the French language, embracing a range of the most frequently taught areas thereof (cf. Piron, 2019a; Piron, 2019b).

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this article is to describe the beginner-level French grammar resource packs «Conjuguer: c'est facile» (Vasilieva, 2015; Vasilieva, 2016; Vasilieva, Suslova, 2017). We are using this material to underline that any teaching resource, if duly and appropriately compiled, has the potential to activate students' cognitive activity, while simultaneously making studying a foreign language in general (Mezzadri, 2016), and its grammar in particular, very entertaining for them. For this reason, it is important to carefully select a methodology of teaching grammar, as well as the ways to give students motivation to keep on learning the language.

Literature review

Teaching grammar cannot be reduced to a linguistics course. According to M. Fougerouse, it is above all a question of reformulating knowledge adapted to the needs and capacities of the learner so that the proposed explanation is not more complex than the point studied. However, metalinguistic simplification should not cause simplicity and a lack of rigor that are both reductive and / or caricatured (Fougerouse, 2001, p. 10; Matthiae, 2012, p. 343). E.N. Ovchinnikova believes that a workbook is a medium of acquiring supplementary competences and skills, based on the units of the textbook used, designed for a better *learning and assimilation* of a given subject (our italics hereinafter) (Ovchinnikova, 2012). Siding with her on this, V.I. Smirnov notes that workbook shall be regarded as a source of information and a study guide, that complements the textbook and serves to expand, deepen and facilitate students' progress (Smirnov, 2001, p. 16-26). It is widely accepted in modern linguodidactics that the *competency-building approach* shall be the governing principle for creating a workbook (Tareva, 2014; Tareva, Kazantseva, 2011).

Grammatical competence is deemed an indispensable component of linguistic competence. Which, in its turn, is an important part of a communicative competence in a foreign language; therefore, it is evident that grammar studies shall be given enough attention in any foreign language course (Abdrafikova, Bajkina, 2015, p. 11-15; Bogolepova, 2016, p. 26-32). Grammar, as one might say, serves as a structural backbone of oral and written speech, since it permeates the whole language, being a skeletal foundation upon which all words, utterances and texts are firmly based (Camussi-Ni, Coateval, 2013).

While compiling our workbooks, we were generally taking four principles of foreign language grammar teaching into account:

1. *Awareness principle*. Schmidt states that students' awareness of the way the language they are learning is structured, is a prerequisite for their progress (Schmidt, 2001, p. 3). He emphasizes the importance of the teachers' ability to focus their learners' attention on specific aspects. While the instructor is explaining some points, their students are hardly able to simultaneously grasp key grammatical / lexical structures from the viewpoint of their formation and their usage. Therefore, it is just reasonable to focus their attention on formation first, otherwise they could grasp only the information on the usage (Tomlinson, 2003). As a result, they would fail to memorize and to use those key structures in an appropriate and accurate way.

2. *Continuity principle*. Foreign language learners usually go through several stages of building their linguistic skills. Therefore, their progress can be ensured only in case they are fully competent to move on to the next level (Korneeva, 2020).

3. *Tailoring methodology to students' needs*. A plentitude of research has revealed that any communication-based methodology implying lots of speaking activities without any grammar exercises and with no attention

paid to the learners' specific needs, is hugely indecent. For instance, the use of communication-based methods was proved inefficient in such cases, when a specific course was taught to increase students' accuracy by minimizing their grammatical mistakes, which would be essential, for example, in preparing for some international exams (Osipova, Pilyugina 2018).

4. *Explicitness in explaining grammar points.* R. Ellis (Ellis, 2003) confirmed that combining grammar exercises with communication practice has a very positive impact on increasing fluency. A number of research papers have revealed that explicit methods of teaching grammar have more long-lasting effect on learners' memory than grammar drill alone without any communication practice.

Methodology

Firstly, in the core of the methodological basis of teaching a foreign language grammar lie, of course, a variety of works introducing the notion of "communicative competence" (Bocharnikova, 2009); as well as papers on its various components (Zimnyaya, 2004), and on various problems of the French language teaching (Bouchendhomme, 2012; Rivers, 1975). In this article, grammatical competence is regarded as an ability of learners to put the grammar knowledge, skills and aptitudes that they acquired, to practical use through communication in a foreign language learned. Consequently, the choice and the character of teaching resources (namely, of a set of exercises aiming at building and improving grammar skills), shall be determined by their relevance to communication processes (Shshepilova, & al. 2017).

Secondly, this problem can be adequately treated only through the use of systemic approach (Saaristo, 2015). Despite the huge variety of material at their disposal, instructors still have to write their own workbooks tailored to a specific audience, to a specific number of hours in the curriculum, etc. Effectiveness of any French language grammar workbook hangs on a large number of criteria including a carefully selected material for building linguistic, speech, sociocultural, social, discursive, and compensatory (strategic) competences; its arrangement and presentation in a logical way; inclusion of exercises encouraging students' active participation; availability of grammar tests to evaluate students' progress. Of an equal importance is the use of visuals and pictorials, since they may substantially boost learners' cognitive activity and increase their motivation to enhance their grammar skills and aptitudes (Mezzadri, 2017b).

Thirdly, in order to acquire a sufficient degree of grammar accuracy, learners need to be well-versed in the structure of the language, and this urges them to do a large amount of grammar drill. Traditionally, exercises aimed at building grammar skills fall into three types: 1) exercises on language structure; 2) exercises involving communication; 3) speaking practice exercises. Undoubtedly, language exercises are a very reliable tool for grammar skill building. They are indispensable at a level preceding fluency. They help to grasp the nature of

the grammatical structures and practice their use by exercises alone, with no speaking practice. It is also worth emphasizing that getting students to discern the fundamental patterns of grammar is of utmost importance (Il'yna, 2020). It is hardly reasonable to hastily include morphological forms into communication practice tasks, until students fully realize how they work. Thus, one needs to allocate a sufficient amount of time to doing language exercises, since they reliably boost grammar skills and lay the foundation for the development of communicative skills.

Results

Let us overview the principles upon which a French language grammar workbook for beginners written by an individual instructor could be based. Since the verb is the core of any sentence, it is impossible to imagine a single class without verb form drill. French verb conjugation in the Present Indicative is especially complicated for most learners. So, because one of the ways to boost grammar skills is the use of grammar commentaries and explanations, one needs to explain to students that despite the diversity of forms, verbs of groups I and II, along with the majority of the group III verbs feature regular inflections.

In a number of starter classes, students learn the foundational verbs of the French grammar - *avoir* and *être*. They are essential for their being able to learn a number of verb tenses and moods, and to generate a large variety of utterances (Dubnyakova 2006). Here are some examples of beginner-level exercises from our workbook, which focus on the conjugation of *avoir* and *être*:

1.

Complétez les phrases avec le verbe AVOIR au présent de l'indicatif.

1. J'... envie d'aller au cinéma. 2. Nous ... une nouvelle voiture. 3. Luc ... sommeil. 4. Ils ... une belle moto. 5. Elles ... deux cours de français par semaine. 6. Vous ... un chien et un chat. 7. Tu ... des amis en Italie. 8. Elle ... un beau sac. 9. J'... l'habitude de prendre le bus pour aller au travail. 10. Pierre ... beaucoup d'amis.

2.

Complétez les phrases avec le verbe ÊTRE au présent de l'indicatif:

Je ... étudiant. 2. Ils ... en vacances. 3. Nous ... contents. 4. Tu ... grand. 5. Elle ... infirmière. 6. Vous ... les frères de Pierre. 7. Il ... en ville. 8. Ils ... à la piscine. 9. Elle ... étrangère. 10. Ces livres ... très intéressants

Another effective way to improve the quality of grammar skills is the use of grammar commentaries and explanations. In this regard, it will be appropriate to tell students that all French verbs are divided into three groups depending on the infinitive ending (infinitif), the Present Participle (Participe Présent) and the Past

Participle (Participle Passé). Here is an example of an explanation of how the verbs are divided onto those groups:

<i>marcher</i> : I ^{er} groupe	<i>finir</i> : II ^e groupe	<i>dépendre</i> : III ^e groupe
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Group I verbs		
The most numerous group (90%). Verbs belonging to this group have the following inflections:		
Infinitif : -er	Participle présent : -ant	Participle passé : -é
aimer	aimant	aimé

chanter, couper, danser, jouer, manger, mélanger, passer, regarder, ronfler...

Group II verbs		
These verbs have the following inflections:		
Infinitif : -ir	Participle présent : -issant	Participle passé : -i
réagir	réagissant	réagi

applaudir, bâtir, garantir, finir, mincir, obéir, unir...

Group III verbs		
This group is constituted by all the remaining verbs, including <i>aller</i> . They are further divided into several subgroups, depending on the alternating roots they feature.		
Infinitif : -ir	Participle présent : -ant	Participle passé : -i
accueillir	accueillant	accueilli

assaillir, cueillir, dormir, faillir, mentir, partir, sentir, servir, sortir, saillir...

Infinitif : -oir	Participle présent : -ant	Participle passé : -u
recevoir	recevant	reçu

avoir, voir, falloir, pouvoir, valoir, vouloir...

Infinitif : -re	Participle présent : -ant	Participle passé : -u
croire	croyant	cru

battre, boire, connaître, vaincre, coudre, pendre, rendre, répondre, croître, lire, moudre, plaire, vivre etc.

We suggest using a deductive way explaining the rules of conjugation of French verbs in the present indicative mood, i.e. first, the student is explained the rule, and then he moves on to exercises. So, it should be explained to students that despite the variety of forms, verbs of groups I and II, as well as most verbs of group III, have permanent endings, presented in the table:

Group I	Group II	Group III
-e	-is	-s, -x, -e
-es	-is	-s, -x, -es
-e	-it	-ø,-t, -e
-ons	-îssons	-ons
-ez	-îssez	-ez
-ent	-îssent	-ent

To master the grammatical material and perfect their skills, students must do lots of exercises, primarily the *imitative* ones, i.e., those focusing on modifying grammatical phenomena. Formal exercises of this type are aimed at memorizing the form and its stereotyping, which is essential for building grammar skills. Here is an example of exercises of this category:

Reconstituez les conjugaisons des verbes attendre, entendre et répondre au présent de l'indicatif:

	attendre	entendre	répondre
je
tu
il/ elle/ on
nous
vous
ils / elles

Transformez les phrases à la personne indiquée, selon le modèle.

1. Je réponds. Ils **répondent**. 2. Je descends. Nous 3. J'attends. Vous 4. J'entends. Tu 5. Je vends. On 6. Je rends. Nous 7. Je prétends. Vous

Now, we are moving on to exercises involving communication. Below is an example of an exercise belonging to this type:

Répondez aux questions de l'enquête préliminaire:

Quel âge avez-vous ?	
Quelle est votre ville natale ?	
Quelle est votre adresse ?	

Avez-vous des frères ou des sœurs ?	
Est-ce que vous êtes sucré ou salé ?	
Quel est votre écrivain préféré ?	
Quelle est votre saison préférée ?	
Quelle est votre couleur préférée ?	
Avez-vous une voiture ?	
Avez-vous un chien ou un chat ?	

Such gap-fill tables based on interrogatives, are an effective tool in the development of speech initiative. Yet another type of exercises for consolidating grammatical material are exercises in translation from a students' first language into a foreign language. Their useability lies in the fact that they allow you to directly focus on the form, mobilizing arbitrary reaction, since the content is already given in them, and also in the fact that they rigidly impose the use of a certain form (Boguslavskaya, 2020). Here is another example from our workbook:

Traduisez:

1. Я жду тебя. 2. Они имеют право защищать свою точку зрения. 3. Это зависит от обстоятельств. 4. Я всегда останавливаюсь в этой гостинице. 5. Мы вас плохо слышим. 6. Вы можете оказать мне небольшую услугу? 7. Ваш рассказ не соответствует действительности. 8. Она всегда все путает. 9. Врачи запрещают ему курить. 10. Эти новости быстро распространяются.

Finally, for proficient mastery of grammatical forms, it is important to use them in productive practical activities. For example, students might be asked to write a story about themselves using the forms of *avoir* and *être* in the Present Indicative tense. To boost their enthusiasm, it is advisable to use gaming techniques, by means of which educational tasks are not explicitly presented to students, but are rather disguised. This rids the students' of the fear to make a mistake, as the group is brought together by their participation in the same activity. Also, a favorable climate of communication is created, since playing games has always to do with emotions; and where there are emotions, there is active participation, there is attention and imagination, and cognitive processes switch on there. Exercises, designed in the form of a game, competition, captivate students' attention, while simultaneously stimulating their cognitive activity, and encouraging participation. And through all these, the important educational work gets done. For example, to memorize verb forms and expand vocabulary, it is advisable to use crossword puzzles that students can do both individually and in pairs or

groups. For verbs with *-eindre / -aindre / -oindre* endings, one can generate a crossword puzzle on the *Générateur de mots croisés* platform. (URL: <https://www.educol.net/crosswordgenerator/fre/>).

For the successful memorization of verb forms and their confident use in speech, systematic work is important, because grammar skills can not only be acquired, but they can also be very easily lost. This sums up the importance of systematizing and revising grammatical material. Such systematization can be grammatical and lexical-grammatical. The first method provides for bringing grammatical knowledge into the system, restoring grammatical paradigms, which contributes to better memorization. For this purpose, students are asked to compile tables of conjugation of verbs in the present tense of the indicative mood with examples (Kuleshova & al., 2020). Such a systematization of grammatical phenomena should be carried out periodically, as material gradually keeps building up to be summarized. As for the lexical and grammatical systematization, those are permanently ongoing processes, since with each portion of new vocabulary, the rule itself, already known to the students, can be updated, and thus the grammatical skill can be improved within the framework of a known grammatical category (Mezzadri, 2017a). Such systematization is of a cross-cutting nature, as it needs regular updates, which ensures efficient consolidation of students' grammar skills. We might conclude that the conditions for the acquisition of firmly consolidated grammar skills are the following: appropriate selection of exercises at all stages of skill-building; variety and novelty of circumstances, situations, tasks; and consistency of work. And we made an attempt to implement all these principles in a series of workbooks on the conjugation of French verbs in the Present tense of the Indicative mood.

Compliance with the graphic requirements for published educational materials plays an important role in maintaining students' interest in the material being taught, also creating conditions for its high-quality assimilation (Zheltukhina, & al. 2017). They should be drawn in a more or less large print, and contain highlighted headings, as well as illustrations in order to facilitate the activity of the eye while working with the manual and, of course, to ensure the comfortable learning.

Besides, visualization generally contributes to a better perception and assimilation of the material. It is no coincidence that the principle of visibility is ranked among the essential principles of didactics, which Jan Amos Comenius called "the golden rule of didactics" (Comenius 1982, p. 384). In accordance with this principle, tables, pictures, and photographs were included in our workbooks. These pictorials are visual aids for the texts and exercises. In creative tasks, they carry an additional information load, while in the exercises of less flexibility and variety, they rather create a positive emotional background for students. Undoubtedly, the use of visual aids makes the education process exciting and entertaining. It should be noted that all images in our series of tutorials are made in the same style, which is one of the important requirements for the illustrative series used in teaching resources. So, in our workbooks, all pictorials were created by a professional art editor.

Those pictures were based on the French comic series “Asterix and Obelix”, and they served not only to kindle students' interest in the subject, but also to build their socio-cultural competence.

Discussions

Grammar is a stumbling block for the majority of foreign language learners. Many of them believe it is but a set of boring and useless rules subject to exhausting – and often meaningless - rote memorization. However, by now, a wide assortment of very diverse teaching resources has come out, and many of those may turn grammar learning into a highly entertaining educational activity. And instructors can, of course, also devise interesting and useful workbooks of their own, in case they are good at scheduling French language classes in accordance with the curriculum, and if they know their students' level. Those workbooks will be helpful, because through them learners will be practicing all the aspects of speech, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening comprehension.

To ensure efficient consolidation of theoretical information, is highly advisable to use various visual aids, such as diagrams, charts, pictures etc. One also needs to bear in mind, that all examples and exercises shall be put within the context of a real-life communication settings. Finally, to encourage students to keep on learning grammar, it would be highly beneficial to use various grammar games, such as crossword puzzles, riddles, quizzes, roleplays etc. All of the aforementioned tools will help make the French language grammar learning very exciting and highly entertaining.

Conclusion

In the end, we shall conclude that efficient foreign language grammar workbooks for beginners taking an optional course shall be rather concise, and they shall feature carefully selected material aimed at building learners' language, speech, socio-cultural, social, discursive, and compensatory (strategic) competences. They shall contain a variety of exercises, arranged according to the “easy to difficult” principle. Those exercises shall ensure students' participation, and feature a number of test assignments to monitor students' progress. Finally, they shall, if possible, be succinctly but expressively designed. These conditions being complied with, students' motivation will increase, their cognitive activity will get activated and it will ultimately boost their foreign language communicative competence to a great extent.

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