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ВО МЕЃУНАРОДНОТО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ „ПАЛИМПСЕСТ“

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Шестиот број на меѓународното научно списание „Палимпсест“ доаѓа како потврда на заложбите од уредниците на оваа научна публикација, но и на раководството и на сиот наставен кадар од Филолошкиот факултет при Универзитетот „Гоце Делчев“ во Штип, за поставување на квалитетот на списанието во секоја смисла на едно повисоко ниво во однос на сите претходно објавени броеви. Впрочем, трудовите што се објавуваат во овој број од списанието и нивната солидна научно-истражувачка вредност го илустрираат зголемениот интерес на лингвистите, книжевните теоретичари, историчари и критичари, културолозите и методичарите на наставата од Македонија и од странство за учество во креирањето на секој нареден број. Имено, во шестиот број на „Палимпсест“ се приложени 25 научни, стручни и прегледни трудови на автори од Македонија (од Универзитетот „Гоце Делчев во Штип, од Универзитетот „Св. Климент Охридски“ од Битола и од Универзитетот „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ од Скопје), но и од други земји како што се Србија, Хрватска, Словенија, Босна и Херцеговина, Словачка, Турција, Брегот на Слоновата Коска и Мароко, во петте постојани рубрики од списанието: Јазик, Книжевност, Култура, Методика на наставата и Прикази. Очигледно е дека за меѓународното научно списание „Палимпсест“, полека но сигурно, се прошируваат сферите на интерес во голем број научни кругови во разни држави од нашава планета. Во таа смисла, пријатно изненадува покажаниот огромен интерес за објавување на научни и стручни трудови во „Палимпсест“ од нашите почитувани колешки и колеги од африканскиот научен круг.

Од друга страна, преку интересот на странските истражувачи за нашето списание, на индиректен начин и Филолошкиот факултет од Штип ја продлабочува и ја проширува научната соработка со поголем број странски универзитети што е во духот на современото високо образование во светски рамки. Во таа смисла, со задоволство можеме да констатираме дека меѓународното научно списание „Палимпсест“ дава значаен прилог во развојот и растежот на нашиот Факултет на меѓународно ниво.

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Толе Белчев, уредник на „Палимпсест“

FOREWORD

The sixth issue of the international scientific journal “Palimpsest” is not only a confirmation of the efforts of the editors of this scientific publication, but also of the management and the academic staff of the Faculty of Philology at Goce Delcev University - Stip for raising the journal’s quality in every sense to a higher level in relation to all previously published issues. In fact, the papers published in this issue and their solid scientific and research value illustrate the growing interest of linguists, literary theorists, historians and critics, cultural scientists and teaching methodologists from Macedonia and abroad for participating in the creation of each upcoming issue. Namely, the sixth issue of “Palimpsest” contains 25 research, theoretical and review papers by authors not only from Macedonia (from Goce Delcev University in Stip, St. Kliment Ohridski University in Bitola, and St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje), but also from other countries such as Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovakia, Turkey, Ivory Coast and Morocco, in the five permanent sections of the journal: Language, Literature, Culture, Teaching Methodology and Book Reviews. It is obvious that the international scientific journal “Palimpsest” slowly but surely expands its areas of interest in many scientific circles in many countries worldwide. In that sense, it is a pleasant surprise that there is great interest in publishing research and theoretical papers in our journal by our respected colleagues from the African scientific circles.

On the other hand, through the interest of foreign researchers the Faculty of Philology in Stip indirectly deepens and extends the scientific cooperation with a number of foreign universities, which is in the spirit of contemporary higher education worldwide. In that sense, we can gladly state that the international scientific journal “Palimpsest” gives a significant contribution to the development and growth of our Faculty internationally.

There is no doubt that this international scientific journal will continue to develop in an upward direction, which will offer significant contribution to the promotion and affirmation of the Macedonian as well as the world’s modern scientific and research work in the fields of linguistics, literary theory, teaching methodology and culture. The persistence and enthusiasm of the large number of participants from 17 countries in the world involved in the creation of every issue of “Palimpsest” provide a solid basis for our belief in the rapid growth of the quality of this international scientific publication. With such faith, we invite you to read the papers in the sixth issue of “Palimpsest”.

Tole Belcev, editor of “Palimpsest”

МЕТОДИКА НА НАСТАВАТА



TEACHING METHODOLOGY

FOUR SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS OF STUDENTS AND A GRAMMAR TEST: SHOULD WE BE ALARMED?

Tatjana Marjanović

University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina
tatjana.marjanovic@flf.unibl.org

Abstract: This paper is an attempt at developing an understanding of what seem to be rather alarming tendencies in teaching English grammar at university level. The aim was to analyze a selection of grammar tests taken by four successive generations of first-year students majoring in English at the University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In order to maintain a reasonable degree of consistency, the tests were all taken immediately after the end of a course in English grammar taught in the academic years 2011-2014, and were compared according to the following criteria: individual test scores, the ratio between passes and fails, and the highest scores achieved. The results are supposed to either dispel or confirm growing fears and suspicions that it is always this year's English majors that perform more poorly in English grammar than their counterparts did the year before.

Keywords: *EFL, grammar, teaching, testing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea behind this paper was to test an intuitive notion that I had developed teaching grammar to first-year students of English at the University of Banja Luka: as the teacher directly responsible for the design and implementation of the first-semester grammar course syllabus, including the process of assessment, I was under the impression that the results were getting progressively worse from one year to the next, from one generation to another. By analyzing a selection of grammar tests taken by four successive generations of our first-year majors in English, I was ultimately able to gain more empirical insight into the matter: my concerns regarding the performance of my students in English grammar, although not entirely dispelled, were modified and accordingly made less susceptible to an intuitive mode of operation.

The fear of increasingly poor grammatical performance taking hold is a dismal thought to begin with: the mere fact that grammar favours accuracy over fluency is enough to cause both students and teachers a great deal of trouble. Most of the time we teachers feel frustrated because of a huge disproportion – an ever more widening gap – between what is taught and what is learnt. Much as we try to seek comfort in the understanding that input and output do not normally coincide in teaching in general, and especially not in teaching grammar and other courses that seek a precise and careful expression, we cannot deny that we are impatient to see our students finally getting to grips with English grammar.

As is probably the case with many other English departments, at the University of Banja Luka we teach English grammar to students who are most likely to become English teachers themselves. It is also worth mentioning at this point that all our students (should) have taken and passed an entrance examination, a significant portion of which tests their practical knowledge of English grammar, i.e. its application in a linguistic/communicative context. Therefore, at least some of them are reasonably expected to have attained the level of advanced learners, to put it roughly, as in all likelihood they have already spent approximately ten years studying English (e.g. in primary and secondary school). This means that they cannot be treated in the same way as beginning learners getting their first taste of third person singular agreement or some such grammatical feature since they have clearly moved past the initial developmental stages of language acquisition.

As for our approach to teaching grammar, I believe it to be as eclectic as possible given the circumstances in which it unfolds: a large (e.g. usually involving around fifty students) lecture-type class, seriously affecting student-student and student-teacher interaction, designed as a separate grammar course rather than taught through skills such as speaking and writing. It goes without saying that a discrete grammar course is never envisaged solely as a resource for effective communication, but also as a tool for gaining broader linguistic knowledge potentially useful to prospective English teachers. However, the focus is not on theoretical competence, i.e. knowledge about language, nor is the course organized to suit a rigid formal perspective. For example, instead of dissociating form from meaning, we try to keep the two inseparable and promote the association of form and meaning as the essence of grammatical ability. Following a functional approach to language (e.g. Halliday, 1985), we insist that grammatical forms express contextualized meanings, just as individual words do. Our students may not be familiar with the concept of lexicogrammar, but that is exactly what we do our best to impart to them. We do it somewhat tacitly and cutting corners to keep it within the students' reach and manageable limits, for communication-based grammars are known to be very difficult to teach. It is for that reason that we make form our starting point, and then try to attach meaning to it. If it is true that "no grammar is entirely formal or entirely functional" (Knapp & Watkins, 2005, p. 39), then we see no wrongdoing in making pedagogical adjustments to a theory to make it more accessible, applicable and, ultimately, more student-friendly (e.g. Thomson and Martinet, 1986).

We also try to minimize the use of metalanguage, simply because a vast proportion of our students come to us relatively ill-equipped to deal with the technicalities of a linguistic analysis. Of course, we presuppose some familiarity with basic linguistic concepts such as subject, predicate, noun, verb, adverbial, and so forth. In the first semester the focus is on nouns, pronouns, determiners, adjectives, adverbs, and some verb forms, while tense and aspect – as part of the grammar of orientation (e.g. Willis, 2003) – are dealt with in the second semester.

In our case grammar instruction is explicit, i.e. aimed at raising awareness of the contents taught in the classroom. This approach contrasts with implicit instruction, which does not imply any awareness on the part of the student that they are actually being taught grammar. The non-interventionist position to grammar

teaching “may be inadequate for promoting high levels of SLA in a timely and efficient manner” (Purpura, 2004, p. 33), which is one more reason we choose to intervene when teaching grammar to first-year students of English at the University of Banja Luka. Yet another reason to promote explicit teaching and raising grammatical awareness with our students is their age: most students in Bosnia and Herzegovina first enrol in a university programme when they are nineteen years old, which is a regular school-leaving age. Our thinking is inspired by findings from studies which seem to be in line with “the general observation that young children rely more on memory than on analysis, adopting a holistic, memory-oriented approach to language processing and learning, whereas older learners may rely more on an analytic mode supported by their superior analytic abilities” (Muñoz, 2014, p. 55).

Yet, year after year I have had the impression that the results of the final exam these students take once they have completed the course are getting poorer and poorer with every new generation. I speak from bitter experience when I say that such feelings can seriously affect a teacher’s work ethic! But then we hear both linguists and teachers all over the world complain about the state of native English at some of the leading educational institutions. Most of the complaints are made about extremely poor writing abilities of students who also happen to be native speakers of English. Here is a quote that suggests just how large-scale the problem seems to be:

Take British university students, for example. The fact is that most of them lack the basic writing skills. This is the shocking but clear message of a report called *Writing Matters* published by the Royal Literary Fund in March 2006. It is based on the experience of 130 writers who worked as RLF fellows in 71 universities, offering students tuition in how to write a letter or an essay, how to draft a report or draw up a job application. A similar – but wider – message was delivered in March 2003 by Bloomsbury, the publisher of the Encarta Concise Dictionary, who consulted 42 professors or teachers of English in Britain, the US, Canada and Australia. They reported strikingly similar problems among students in the four countries.

(Hicks, 2007, pp. 1-2)

If that is the state of English with native speakers, and if this is indeed a global trend, then perhaps we should stop wondering at the inadequacies and shortcomings of our EFL learners grappling with English grammar some twenty years after the 1990s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has, among other things, gravely and irrevocably disrupted the educational system from primary school onwards. That said, our troubled past is no longer a valid excuse meant to absolve us from doing all we possibly can to save whatever can be saved in the system of tertiary education. And one step in that direction may be to try and find some empirical support for this discussion rather than let our intuition determine its course.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Participating in this study were all the students taking the *English Grammar I* final test in the exam term immediately following the end of the semester, i.e. either late January or early February in the interval of four successive academic years, starting with 2011 and ending with 2014. *English Grammar I* is a core course taught in the first semester of a four-year undergraduate programme in the University of Banja Luka's English Department.

All the students enrolled in the first year will have passed an entrance exam, which presupposes a certain level of grammatical competence on their part. Notwithstanding individual differences, most of them can be characterized as English language learners at intermediate level although some give the impression of either outperforming or underperforming in class due to their varied speaking skills. Also, it is not necessarily the case that the most outspoken of students are always the most grammatically competent ones. These all remain, however, highly speculative evaluations whereas more reliable ones are obtained in formal testing contexts, initially on a midterm test or, even more so, on a final one. This is understandable since midterm grammar tests are more limited in scope and entail a lesser degree of complexity than that found in the contents of a final exam.

In order to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency in the process of data collection, I opted to focus on a single exam term with its cohort of test takers. This decision was in part motivated by the desire to secure a sufficient number of participants in the study since the turnout was the highest in the first exam term, with the number of test takers ranging between 43 and 69 per year. The evident difference in numbers naturally reflected the size of each individual class, as well as the dropout rate, which is always more or less unpredictable.

2.2. A Grammar Test as Instrument

All the 204 copies of four equally formatted grammar tests with different lexicogrammatical contents were distributed during a four-year interval by a professor-assistant tandem teaching the course, taken by those students who had signed up for the earliest exam date following the end of the course, and graded by the same professor who had designed and put together all the tests analyzed in the study. The students were duly notified about the results of the exam and were awarded their grades with the usual administrative procedure fully observed. One of the aims of the study was to allow for a regular and standard form of exam-taking, thus minimizing interference with the assessment process for the sake of obtaining data with a high level of authenticity.

In the process of collecting data, the test as a whole became a research instrument although, at least for some of the issues raised in the study, some of its segments were considered to have more explanatory potential than others. The focus was on the number of passes (i.e. 50+ scores) versus the number of fails (i.e. 0-50 scores), as well as high passes (i.e. 80+ scores). One test task, in Table 2 referred to as the question task, was singled out for being somewhat of a stumbling block for students despite its relatively simple repetitive pattern. The percentages

calculated for this task revealed the presence of three kinds of scores: zero, where not a single answer was correct and no credit could accordingly be awarded; 50 and below, where at least half the answers were incorrect; and over 80, which counted as relatively good answers. The two kinds of data collected, as well as the way they were collected and analyzed, were only capable of capturing a general trend, if there was one, rather than lead to any far-reaching conclusions about the state of English grammar or university students.

2.3. Data Collection

The tests analysed in this study were administered in a regular exam setting: the venue, the date, and the exact hour were communicated to all first-year students through conventional means and within ample timeframe. No participant had any prior knowledge that this or any other study was being planned and carried out, which was a conscious decision made in order to reduce the level of examination stress and test anxiety potentially resulting in their poorer performance.

The format of the grammar test taken by all participants in the study was unchanged during the research interval, i.e. the academic years 2011-2014. All the instructions in the test were identical for all participants, and so were the tasks themselves, whereas the actual lexicogrammatical contents differed from one test to another. No grammatical notion that had not been previously taught entered any of the grammar tests taken by first-year students in general. Each final exam was preceded by an in-class mock test, the aim of which was to familiarize students with the tasks they would be asked to do on the actual test.

All four exams lasted an hour each and were administered and invigilated by the same professor-assistant tandem in charge of teaching the course. Although the study covered an interval of four years, the spikes of data collection activity were reported on only four days of testing in January or February, one each year. Finally, all four exam sessions were conducted in the spirit of fair play with no record of foul action leading to disqualification.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When I set out to test my intuitive observation that teaching grammar was becoming extremely challenging against the actual grammar test performance by four successive generations of students at the University of Banja Luka, ranging from the year 2011 to the year 2014, I did not realize that I would be in for a big surprise: expressed in figures, the findings were not as dramatic as I psychologically felt them to be. My feelings of certainty that with each new generation came significantly poorer results for the final grammar test were brought into question by the percentages expressed in Table 1.

Table 1. Grammar test results per academic year

YEAR	FAILS (%)	80+ SCORES (%)
2011	49	10
2012	33	6
2013	63	7
2014	55	2

The 2012 students stand out with only 33% of those failing the test, which is the unfortunate outcome for all students whose scores are below 51 out of a total of 100. By contrast, the 2013 students had the largest percentage of fails, with only 37% of those who actually passed the final exam.

It may be worthwhile to point out again that the tests analyzed were all taken in the first exam term – immediately following the end of the course – either in January or February. This may be important on two accounts: it is then that we get the most massive turnout since most students decide not to wait too long to take the test, and it is then that we get the highest scores resulting in some of the very good to excellent marks (i.e. 8, 9, or 10).

The 2013 students were also famously undisciplined, making it harder for their teachers to remain focused and even feel sympathetic towards the state of their English. These students were capable of making interaction and content delivery in the classroom very difficult, which may have had implications for the quality of teaching itself and which could have ultimately prompted their teachers to lose sight of any mitigating circumstances in the process of designing and grading their tests. Maintaining professionalism hopefully ensured they were not discriminated against, but it is true that their performance was assessed in an unwaveringly matter-of-fact manner. With no high hopes for 2013, we could have had some faith restored the following year. That, to my dismay, did not happen: with only 45% passes, the students gave us no reason to celebrate even though they were much easier to handle discipline-wise.

Another surprise came with the 2011 students: I had formed a very positive image in my mind of them as knowledgeable and conscientious learners of English, but they nevertheless seemed to have fared only slightly better than the 2014 grammar class.

What conclusions do we draw from this? For one, much as we feel that each new generation of first-year students is incredibly more difficult to teach than the previous one, some very simple statistics may prove us wrong: notwithstanding a few exceptions, the individual percentages do not differ drastically from one another. That seems to be the reality of teaching grammar at the University of Banja Luka, and it has been a constant for a while: not as bad as we feel it is, nor as good as we hoped it would be. Quite understandably, we teachers are no strangers to feelings of disappointment: after every new batch of papers to grade, our expectations have been thwarted and we are led into believing that the time spent teaching has not been properly rewarded. Consequently, we feel that things are going from bad to worse while in reality there may be little deviation from the standard. Perhaps this is due to the recency effect: we remember best the events closest to us in time, while our memory embellishes and alters our perception of what happened earlier in the past. Or maybe we are plainly fatigued by our students' generally poor performance year after year, which surely paints our teacher reality in somewhat bleak colours.

The second column in Table 1 is dedicated to those scores that are considered to be above the average – in our context those would be the marks eight, nine, and ten. They are obviously more in line with individual student performance

than they are with general results. In other words, the number of very good to excellent scores has a rather random distribution in the table. It may also have something to do with the number of candidates taking the test; for example, the year 2011 stands out with 69 students compared to the range between 43 and 48 for the three remaining years. The challenging 2013 first-year class has a positive image in this respect, with seven 80+ scores, while the ‘best’ 2012 year is down by one per cent. The 2014 students did not excel individually, reporting only two 80+ scores, which was a particularly discouraging outcome.

In the next stage of this small-scale research I decided to focus on the grammar task requiring the students to ask questions about clausal subjects, objects, or adverbials. This task was singled out for two main reasons: first, the interrogative pattern was taught explicitly; also, given the amount of practice devoted to asking questions in English, the pattern was expected to be relatively easy to reproduce, at least in writing.

Now, I am aware of what some call the ‘Please, teacher, what mean X?-syndrome’ (Willis, 2003, p. 5), and that it usually takes a long time for students to produce question forms in English accurately in spontaneous communication. The following passage, written in a comfortingly confessional tone, captures the feelings of many a grammar teacher across the globe:

Learners may have been endlessly drilled in forms like *What do you want? Where do you live?* and so on. They will certainly have heard the phrase *What does X mean?* many, many times. But in class they consistently put up their hands and ask the question *Please, teacher, what mean X?* In time, usually a long time, they get past this stage and begin to produce questions with *do* in the appropriate form, and the teacher breathes a sigh of relief at this evidence of real progress.

(Willis, 2003, p. 5)

An extenuating circumstance in our case is that when testing students on interrogative forms, I only assess their ability to produce planned utterances in writing that they have plenty of time to revise without having to deal with any of the distractions of spontaneous speech, such as getting their message across, choosing the right vocabulary, etc. Once speed and fluency are put on hold, there should be nothing getting in the way of accuracy, albeit achieved with a conscious effort rather than spontaneously. The question task results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Question task results per academic year

YEAR	ZERO SCORES (%)	1-50 SCORES (%)	80+ SCORES (%)
2011	36	61	20
2012	6	33	29
2013	12	60	21
2014	11	39	25

The percentages once again failed to support my initial hypothesis as there was no obvious trend of student performance deteriorating from the year 2011 onwards. In other words, things actually did not go from bad to worse. Surprisingly enough, the 2011 first-year students underperformed on the question task across the board: they had the highest percentages of below 50 as well as zero scores, and the lowest percentage of very good to excellent scores. Even the boisterous 2013 grammar class did slightly better on this task. I am not surprised, though, that the best scores were attributed to the 2012 first-year students in all three sections. The 2014 grammar test takers seem to have done better on the question task than the general results would have suggested.

This is not to say that the percentages in Table 2 are at all encouraging, so it remains unclear why the relatively fixed interrogative pattern (e.g. question word + auxiliary + subject + lexical verb + complement(s) for non-subject questions) should be so difficult to reproduce even after explicit instruction and the students' prolonged exposure to it. The processes of recognition and system building (Willis, 2003, pp. 8-13) should have paved the way for substantial progress with interrogative forms as part of the students' conscious knowledge, which makes it difficult to account for at least some mistakes made all too commonly despite the (written) format of the test allowing for ample planning time.

The following is a sketchy overview of what seem to be the most recurring erroneous answers provided by some of our first-year students when instructed to ask questions about the underlined segments. The numbers in parentheses that precede each of the examples extracted from the corpus are provided for ease of reference.

(1) The student's mother strongly insists on the prinicipal's resignation.

*What the student's mother strongly insists on?

The only interrogative feature still remaining in (1) is the question word at the beginning of the clause (alongside the question mark at the end of it), while the word order is clearly that of a declarative clause. The only way this can be treated as a question is from a lexical point of view, whereas the structure is entirely non-interrogative.

(2) Both visitors had to stop because of a security check.

*Why did both visitors had to stop?

Although the word order is correct in (2), the question is still ungrammatical due to the past tense having been marked twice. This kind of mistake often accompanies irregular and modal verbs, which suggests lack of familiarity with both individual verb forms and verb phrase structure as a whole. As interrogative forms mainly depend on getting the verbs right, be they regular or irregular, no partial credit is awarded for such answers. Needless to say, most students object to the bar being set too high on the part of those designing, administering, and grading the test. In our defence, the odd irregular verb in the question task is carefully selected from among some of the commonest and most frequent verbs in general (e.g. *feed, get, go, meet,*

sell, etc.). If such forms still have not made their way into a first-year student's mental lexicon, then that is certainly something to reflect on.

(3) In prison they fed us dry bread, most of which was mouldy.

*With what they fed you in prison?

On top of the missing interrogative scaffolding, the question in (3) is representative of additions and other unwanted changes that are sometimes made to the original structure. In this particular case the preposition *with* is completely uncalled for, obviously altering the meaning of the clause. This type of error goes beyond verb phrase structure per se, presupposing familiarity with verb phrase complementation. That *feed* is a ditransitive verb, i.e. allowing for two objects, is not even the kind of technical knowledge first-year students need to have at this point, but they should see that the underlined segment is a nominal structure revolving around the noun *bread* and prompting a pronominal (i.e. *what*) question. If they fail to recognize this but adhere to the right word order and verb forms, i.e. *did they feed you in prison*, they are entitled to at least partial credit.

(4) The big lad had already eaten four sandwiches.

*How much sandwiches had the big lad eat?

In (4) the determiner *much* is wrongly used with a pluralized noun, and the past perfect verb form has been distorted. The latter makes no case for partial credit scoring as the error is clearly verb related and follows hours of exposure and conscious attention to the English tense paradigm through explicit instruction. The knowledge required does not even extend to meaning but is confined to form recognition alone, which is why such grammatical errors are considered, at least from a teacher's point of view, to be of a very basic kind. One last remark about this sentence concerns the oft-missing adverbial *already*, the sudden disappearance of which, for all we know, might be characterized as an evasive strategy suggesting insufficient familiarity with word order in English. Whether purposely omitted or simply overlooked, the missing adverbial still allowed for partial credit scoring if the resulting question was grammatically well-formed.

The analysis of the question task has also raised the issue of something that may (though not necessarily, of course) be one of the early signs of poor grammatical performance, which is most easily seen in basic misspellings of words to copy from the test itself, such as **allready* instead of *already*, **tomorrow* instead of *tomorrow*, **althought* instead of *although*, etc. Because they seem largely incompatible with studying grammar, which is almost inconceivable without paying attention to detail, such shortcomings (possibly a result of negligence) deserve to be taken seriously rather than regarded as minor omissions irrelevant to one's grammatical competence.

Another puzzling feature is the ability of some students to form grammatically correct questions such as *Where do you live?* but err in those like **Where Martin lives?* This phenomenon can be explained by referring to Sinclair's idiom principle (1991). In other words, the students may have heard clauses like

Where do you live? often enough to store and retrieve them as single units, prefabricated chunks, without any recourse to an emerging structural pattern. Much as one agrees with the idiom principle as a linguistic fact, there is no guarantee that it will benefit all grammar-learning non-native speakers of English at all times. A natural alternative for such students would then be to try to rely more heavily on their analytical skills and make the most of the open-choice principle, according to which countless utterances are formed on the basis of systematic patterning in language. Perhaps empowering their analytical faculties – along with their memory – would result in many more grammatically well-formed questions such as *Where does Martin live?* than is the case now.

As implied in the preceding discussion, I mostly aim at limited-production tasks when designing a test because I want the students taking it to do more than simply recognize a correct answer among a set of options. Characteristic of classroom rather than large-scale grammar assessment, the final exam in *English Grammar 1* at the University of Banja Luka does not make for a high-stakes exam, for there is plenty of opportunity to retake and ultimately pass the exam within a very generously allotted timeframe (i.e. at least four resits distributed relatively evenly throughout a school year). Although test development in our case does not rely on an official construct (Cushing Weigle, 2002, p. 41), I do think very carefully about who the test takers are, and what I want to measure and why. A general idea of the format and contents of a first-year English grammar test at the University of Banja Luka can be obtained from a full-length copy in Appendix.

4. CONCLUSION

When I ask my students what factors and feelings may have influenced their decision to study English as a foreign language at an institution which is possibly a regional leader in the training of future generations of English language teachers, the different answers I get seem to coincide in at least one aspect: they all like the English language. When further asked whether the courses they took corresponded to their expectations prior to getting to know the reality of studying a language at university level, their response is more often than not a distinct no. When prompted to elaborate, they struggle to explain that they thought it would be a good, convenient, inexpensive way to learn some more English: they nod approvingly at phrases such as speaking English, learning new vocabulary and idioms, then stop being supportive when confronted with notions such as knowledge about language, structural analysis, extensive reading, accuracy, attention to detail, and the like. As far as they knew – and largely based on input from communicative English language teaching throughout primary and secondary education – learning English was easy, so what could possibly go wrong? These false expectations may be greatly responsible for a mismatch between what the majority of students think they need to know and what they actually get in their courses and subsequent exams. The disparity seems to have at least something to do with the ‘Affective Interface’ Hypothesis, especially as far as the acquisition of grammar is concerned:

Assuming the AFH is correct, even though you love the target culture and have the warmest feeling for native speakers of that target language, if you have negative feelings about acquiring grammar you should experience delays in phonological and syntactic acquisition. However, if you dislike the target culture and its people but simply like learning languages irrespective of who speaks them, your L2 grammatical development should benefit from this positive affect.

(Smith, 2014, p. 17)

In conclusion, English grammar test scores for four successive generations of first-year students at the University of Banja Luka suggest that we have been running in circles for a while: things are not getting dramatically worse, but they are definitely not getting significantly better either. I am afraid there are no quick fixes here, just insistence – against all odds – on grammar as a system of contextualized forms and meanings which has to be built consistently and with great attention to detail. This task is both massive and difficult, especially if we believe the following words to be true: ‘Grammar is one of our key literacy technologies. Without a knowledge of grammar the process of becoming literate becomes hazardous’ (Knapp & Watkins, 2005, p. 32). All said and done, it seems that we teachers are in this for the long haul.

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Appendix

ENGLISH GRAMMAR 1 FINAL EXAM

Total = 50 points

1 Insert suitable prepositions (5 points):

- a. Yesterday the children went ____ a walk and didn't get back ____ 10 p.m. Their mother was furious ____ them ____ coming in so late.
- b. What's the cheapest way of getting ____ Edinburgh? ~ Well, you could hitch-hike there ____ next ____ nothing, or you could go by coach ____ about \$20.
- c. Three of them are students ____ the university, the fourth is here ____ holiday.

2 Ask questions about the underlined segments (8 points):

- a. Mr Peterson had to deal with a lot of difficult issues when the meeting was over.
- _____
- _____

- b. Our prodigal son needs to explain why he hasn't written before.
- _____
- _____

- c. All these shabby clothes belong to Joan, my long-lost sister.
- _____
- _____

- d. The young actor has been exposed to a lot of criticism for the past couple of weeks.
- _____
- _____

3 Combine the pairs of sentences by means of relative pronouns (8 points):

- a. The boy was a philosophy student and wanted to sit up half the night discussing philosophy. Peter shared a flat with this boy.
- _____
- _____

- b. He sits at his desk all day with his head in his hands. It gets on my nerves.
- _____
- _____

- c. Tom's leg is still in bandages. He'll have to watch the match from the stand.
- _____
- _____

d. The officers were questioning a person about the recent hold-up at the local supermarket. The person has been released.

The person

4 Supply the required verb forms (5 points):

- a. Future continuous of the verb 'rip', contracted negative
- b. Perfect infinitive of the verb 'sink'
- c. Present perfect continuous of the verb 'dine', 2nd person sg
- d. Past perfect of the verb 'sit'
- e. Present continuous of the verb 'imagine', 1st person pl

5 Find the most suitable positions for the segments in brackets (5 points):

Police across the country were on the lookout.

(at the Buffalo hospital complex, for the 49-year-old surgeon, in connection with the shooting death, of his ex-girlfriend, where they both worked)

6 Correct the mistakes in the sentences (5 points):

- a. Let's meet at the theatre, do we?
- b. Beside, it offends my deepest instincts not to write.
- c. It was nothing other then a not very severe fever he got after bathing in the river there.
- d. Chris typed the text, kept the flat quietly, took the kids out and so on.
- e. To expect Europe to become a single cultural bath is simple to misunderstand the nature of the European identity.

7 Rewrite the sentences using modal verbs as appropriate (8 points):

a. (It is possible that) Mr Green has seen his daughter steal money from his wallet.

b. You are trying to reason with her. (That is not sensible of you.)

c. Sue refuses to help Josh with his homework.

d. It was publicly announced that 99 percent of all American adults were able to read and write.

8 Correct the mistakes in determiners, nouns or pronouns as appropriate (6 points):

- a. How many break-inns did you say were reported last month?
- b. If you hate the way you look in that jeans, buy some new pyjamas!
- c. You are kindly asked to leave your luggage in the front of the entrance.
- d. Yesterday you said you had no information, and now you're saying you have one.
- e. I did what you told me to do, what wasn't such a clever idea.
- f. Although Shukumar was six foot tall, he felt dwarfed in the back seat.

This is the end of the test. Do not forget to write your name at the top of page one.

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