



Czech Teachers' Subjective Theories about Teaching Grammar

Teorías subjetivas de los profesores checos sobre la enseñanza de la gramática

Ivana Hurytová
Charles University in Prague



Abstract

Modern subject didactics of the mother tongue postulates that the fundamental goal of teaching the mother tongue is the communication goal and that grammar instruction has a supporting function in the development of communication skills. However, research into teaching processes shows that grammatical-normative and formal-cognitive approaches to the language curriculum predominate to a large extent in practice, and that the teaching grammar is understood as an end in itself, rather than as a means. The causes of this fact are various, but especially from international research it can be concluded that what are known as the subjective theories of teachers (teachers' beliefs) have a significant influence. Our goal is to explore this phenomenon in the reality of the Czech school. In the article we will present the results of two pilot probes focused on the teacher's concept of the communication-functional approach and on the position of grammar in language education.

Keywords: Subjective theories; Teachers' beliefs; Didactics of the mother tongue; Communicative-functional approach; Teaching grammar

Resumen

Las didácticas subjetivas modernas de la lengua materna postulan que la meta fundamental de enseñar la lengua materna es comunicativa y que la instrucción gramatical cumple con una función de soporte en el desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas. Sin embargo, investigaciones sobre los procesos de enseñanza muestran que los enfoques gramático-normativos y formales-cognitivos predominan en la práctica dentro del currículo de educación lingüística y que la enseñanza de la gramática es entendida como un fin en sí mismo, más que como un medio. Las causas de este hecho son varias, pero a partir de la investigación internacional puede concluirse que las teorías subjetivas de profesores (creencias de profesores) tienen una influencia importante. Nuestra meta es explorar este fenómeno en el contexto de las escuelas checas. En el artículo presentaremos los resultados de dos pruebas piloto centradas en el concepto del profesor sobre el enfoque comunicativo-funcional y en la posición de la gramática en la enseñanza del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: Teorías subjetivas; Creencias de profesores; Didácticas de la lengua materna; Enfoque comunicativo-funcional; Enseñanza de gramática

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the debate on the quality of teaching has shifted from hard factors and criteria referring to teaching efficiency or productivity to softer ones, such as the ethos and culture of the school, the moral and value orientation of those who work in the school, etc. (Janík, 2012). The basic determinants of teaching are a) organization and management of the class (use of time, appropriate pace and structure); b) the way goals and contents are mediated (degree of quality, measure and coherence); c) the quality of learning tasks (degree of cognitive activation and focus of activities); and d) support of the learning climate (including constructive work with error and adaptivity of teaching practices) (Janík et al., 2018).

The quality of teaching is formed by a number of factors: the state and its educational policy, school management, material equipment of the school, quality of textbooks and teaching materials, etc. However, the key actor in shaping the teaching and learning environment is the teacher and the quality of his/her didactic competences. The teachers constitute the teaching on the basis of knowledge of the content and didactic knowledge of the content (Shulman, 1987).

However, when designing teaching they apply more than that: a highly important role in the teachers' thinking about their teaching is played by their subjective theories (also known as teachers' beliefs). As numerous researchers show (see below), they have a greater influence on the formation of teaching than official documents, scientific discussions and professional recommendations, or even high quality and innovative teacher training.¹

REFLEXION OF SUBJECTIVE THEORIES DEVELOPMENT

Evans et al. (2014) maintain that scholarly literature from the 1980s onward established the construct of teacher beliefs as a form of cognition that greatly influences what happens in classrooms. According to Barbara B. Levin, teachers hold many different kinds of beliefs simultaneously: about knowledge, about their students, and about themselves. Teachers also hold beliefs about the content they teach (specifically the subject matter), their way of teaching (pedagogy) and about the many moral and ethical dilemmas and social issues which affect their teaching (Levin, 2015).

¹ The term *teacher's beliefs* is widespread especially in the Anglo-American environment, therefore we keep it in citations and paraphrases of professional literature from this area. Later we will explain why we chose the term *subjective theories*.

Among the first authors to mention teachers' beliefs is Elbaz (1983), who promoted the term *practical knowledge* to describe the teachers' principles of action, practical principles and ideas that guide their action. The content of the teacher's practical knowledge means for her knowledge of self, of the milieu of teaching, of subject matter, curriculum development, and instruction. Further distinguished are five orientations to describe the way practical knowledge is held and used. There is orientation to situation (interaction theoretical knowledge – specific teaching situation); personal orientation (personal character of teacher's knowledge); social orientation (interaction teacher - student); experiential orientation (own experience) and theoretical orientation (teacher's knowledge in relation to the field of theory).

In 1980s teachers' beliefs were perceived more as a subset of the teacher's knowledge. Some authors, however, emphasized their great importance and influence and required their research (Shulman, 1987). Researchers introduced various terms to capture the relations between knowledge and practice: *personal practical knowledge* (Clandinin, 1986), *practical arguments and practical reasoning* (Fenstermacher, 1986), *practical philosophy* (Goodman, 1988), *theory of action* (Marland & Osborne, 1990), etc.

Nespor (1987) introduced teachers' beliefs as a theoretical construct and argued that teachers rely more on their core belief systems rather than on academic knowledge when working in the classroom. According to him, beliefs consist of episodic knowledge, characterized by remembered stories and events; affective elements and beliefs about the existence or nonexistence categorical entities (such as "brightness", "immaturity", "ability" and "laziness"). Even if according to Evans et al. (2014), Nespor views teachers' beliefs as an integration of knowledge and feeling built up largely through teaching experience, the perception of beliefs as a psychological phenomenon seems to prevail.

In 1990s several researchers tried to clarify the difference between *knowledge* and *beliefs* (Calderhead, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). According to them, beliefs are more personal, while knowledge is based on facts. However, according to Kagan (1992), much of what was considered professional knowledge should be classified as beliefs, and Pajares (1992) added that attitudes, values, perceptions, theories, and ideas are also different beliefs. Due to this breadth, the concept could not be completely clarified.

Later researches bring beliefs and knowledge back together again, confirm their close connection, and return to the term practical knowledge, guiding the

behaviour of teachers in specific teaching situation, as defined by Elbaz above (Elbaz, 1983).

In the Czech environment, the term *teacher's conception of teaching* was adopted in 1990s (in Czech *Učitelovo pojetí výuky*), which is also relatively broad. According to Mareš (Mareš et al., 1996), it includes several partial concepts, especially the concept of a) goals, b) curriculum, c) organizational forms, d) teaching methods, conditions and means, e) the pupil as an individual, f) group of pupils, g) teaching role and oneself as a teacher, and h) other participants in the pedagogical process. At the same time Mareš states that this definition is not complete and that is possible to supplement the list with other components in connection with further research. The concept of the teacher's conception of teaching has gained ground in the field of teacher education. Here we also encounter the concept *student's conception of teaching* (Musil et al., 2003; Švec, 1999).

However, we agree with Janík (2007), who describes the teacher's conception of teaching as a "container concept", which is sometimes used vaguely to denote various facts. The author therefore proposes a more precise term based on the German language area, namely *subjective theory* (Janík, 2007; Koubek & Janík, 2015). The definition is based on German didactics (Groeben et al., 1988), in which subjective theories shape the concept of the world and themselves. According to Koubek & Janík (2015, p. 50), "they can be reconstructed in communication and their existence can be verified retrospectively in actions; they have an implicit argumentative structure; perform the function of description, explanation, prognosis and technology in relation to the actions of the subject"

While the teacher's conception of teaching can be understood according to Janík (2007) as a general (rather implicit) organizer of teacher's pedagogical thinking and actions, subjective theory also includes the arguments by which the teachers justify their decision and actions in pedagogical situations. Subjective theory thus contains the arguments of the teacher by which she explains or predicts his action and this, unlike the teacher's conception of teaching, makes it not only conscious, but also enabling verbal reconstruction (Koubek & Janík, 2015). According to Janík (2007), it is "subjective cognition", which leads the teacher's actions. The teacher is aware of it and therefore can justify her decisions and actions in pedagogical situations. Subjective theories consist of elements of knowledge that are in relation to each other. They form individually, organizing our knowledge into structures that resemble scientific theories. Subjective theory thus has its object (for

example teaching, learning), its subject (its owner) and its quality (evaluative attribute).

Regarding our research, we can give an example. Teachers of Czech language were asked to specify the time spent teaching grammar during lessons. The majority of them said that they spent most of their time teaching on explaining and practising the grammatical rules, but only some of them justified it. The others were asked later by a researcher why they evaluate teaching grammar so much, so that we received their complete subjective theory (not only the statement but also the reasoning). However, Janík (2007) also admits that in some cases the terms “the teacher’s conception of teaching” and “subjective theories” can be synonymous. The elaborate conception of teaching, which is theoretically justified and rationally argued, approaches the concept of subjective theory. In this case the two concepts merge. For our purposes we will build on the concept as understood by German pedagogy and Janík (2007) and Koubek & Janík (2015), so we prefer the term “subjective theory” in our research.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE THEORIES AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

A number of studies summarized in, for example Fives & Gill (2015), Evans et al. (2014), Watson (2015), and Camps & Fontich (2019), as well as our previous experience confirm that teachers’ actions in the pedagogical process do not always correspond to their declared subjective theories. In the Czech environment this is pointed out by, for example, Šed’ová at al. (2012), Šed’ová at al., (2020), Šimoník (1994), and Podlahová (2004).

If grammar teaching is concerned, debates about the position of grammar in L1 have been recurrent in recent decades (and especially in Anglophone countries, see Myhill et al., 2012, 2013), L1 grammar has made a strong comeback in the curricula, because of the research indicating positive effects of contextualized grammar teaching on writing development (see Boivin et al., 2018; Fontich & Camps, 2014; Fontich et al., 2020; Rättyä et al., 2019). But in the reality of schools much L1 grammar teaching is not contextualized and still consists of decontextualized parsing exercises (van Rijt et al., 2019; van Rijt et al., 2020).

This discrepancy could be partly clarified by research over the past three decades, which has resulted in a set of assumptions about the nature of subjective theories that are widely accepted. The list can be found in Evans et al. (2014, p. 17-18):

1. Beliefs are far more influential than academic knowledge in framing, analyzing and solving problems and making teaching decisions.
2. Some beliefs are more strongly held than others, resulting in 'core' and 'peripheral' beliefs. An individual's core beliefs may be more resistant to change.
3. Beliefs do not exist independently of one another, but are arranged in an ecology or an 'internal architecture' of systems that have psychological importance to the individual.
4. Individuals may have competing belief sets about the same topic.
5. When one belief is changed it is likely to affect other beliefs throughout the system.
6. Some scholars posit that belief systems occur in 'nests' (Bryan, 2003) or sets of beliefs, including core and peripheral beliefs about various principles that are linked or grouped together.

These conclusions show that subjective theories can have more complex layered structures. Watson (2015) lists a number of studies which confirm that subjective theories are shaped by prior experiences of teaching and being taught. They probably begin to be shaped from the teacher's own schooling, and are formed during education in didactics, and finally in the teaching process. Above, there is some degree of plasticity of subjective theories; some of them can change with time and experience, but it seems that there are beliefs within the individual that are more stable or consistent (Evans et al., 2014).

As we used for this chapter Anglosaxon literature resources we used also the term *teachers' beliefs*. But, as previously mentioned, the elaborate conception of teaching, which is theoretically justified and rationally argued, approaches the concept of subjective theory, analogically, considering the elaborate teachers' beliefs and subjective theories identical.

SUBJECTIVE THEORIES OF GRAMMAR: THE GRAMMATICAL-NORMATIVE AND FORMAL-COGNITIVE APPROACH VERSUS THE COMMUNICATIVE-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The didactics of the mother tongue in many countries solve the problem of the importance and form of grammar teaching, namely the relationship between teaching grammar and developing the communication skills of pupils. In the UK, research is focused on the relationship between grammar and the development of writing skills (known as contextualized grammar) and teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar (see Locke, 2010; Myhill et al., 2012; Watson, 2015). The same topic is then dealt with as subject didactics L1, for instance in Spain, the Netherlands, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Finland, Portugal, Canada, and Germany, which

confirms the high topicality of this issue (Boivin et al., 2018; Fontich, 2015; Fontich et al., 2020; Liptáková, 2011; Rättyä et al., 2019; Štěpáník & Chvál, 2019; Szymańska, 2016; van Rijt et al., 2019). There is a similar situation in the Czech Republic (Čechová, 1998; Čechová & Al, 1995; Čechová & Styblík, 1998; Hájková, 2013, 2014; Štěpáník, 2020; Štěpáník & Chvál, 2016; Štěpáník et al., 2020; Svobodová, 2003).

The curriculum and modern field didactics – not only of Czech – postulate the communicative aim as fundamental (Štěpáník, 2020). Although the communication concept has been developing since the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, a relatively significant gap can be observed between didactic theory and school practice (Čechová & Styblík, 1998; Zimová, 2012, 2016). Not only many teachers, but even some academics still take a more formal-grammatical approach without a firm link to the development of pupils' communication skills. According to Hauser et al. (1994),

The teaching of the Czech language must reflect a consideration of communication needs. Pupils should be able to express themselves in a standard language in different situations for different purposes. It is stylistic teaching especially which should serve this. The acquisition of standard language can only be based on grammar. The communication aspect is subordinate to it, it is not decisive. (p. 10)

Although the claim by Hauser et al. (1994) is almost thirty years old, it seems that school practice comes from it in many ways (Štěpáník, 2020). There are several reasons for this: the question of the function of grammatical content generally and the relation between teaching grammar and developing communication skills; the historical development of the subject, which was greatly influenced by the political situation in the country; the very close bond between Czech didactics and Czech linguistics; the question of the position of Standard Czech in communication and the overall change in communication processes today, elaborated in (Štěpáník et al., 2020).

Due to the history of the subject and the close bond between Czech linguistics and didactics (Šmejkalová, 2010), the learning and teaching environment of Czech is mainly created through scientific methodology. Thus, the main aim of such teaching is the transfer of linguistic knowledge – linguistic concepts, definitions and terminology, in other words “small linguistics” (Štěpáník, 2020).

After the political change in 1989 (known as the Velvet Revolution, which meant the fall of the Communist regime with its devastating influence on education), the educational system changed and opened more to the latest foreign

knowledge and international research. This influence was used for stronger promotion of the communication concept in language teaching (Čechová, 1998; Čechová & Styblík, 1998; Šebesta, 2005). Although these ideas have appeared in the domestic didactics of language and especially in teaching composition (style) since the 1980s, there is still uncertainty about what to imagine under communication education. On the one hand, teachers narrow it to utilitarian training in oral communication and put it in opposition to language teaching; on the other hand, they reject it for fear that it could push systemic education out of the subject.

In addition, a number of researchers and teachers in recent years have shown that traditional teaching with an emphasis on formally conceived grammar does not produce positive results. The Czech language is perceived by pupils as an unpopular subject (Pavelková, 2010), especially the teaching of grammar, which detached from the function of language and taught on isolated, often unrealistic sentences, works on its own, and pupils do not see any sense in it. The grammatical-normative approach provides an inadequate description of the functionality of the language system and is detached from the student's ideas about the functioning of language and his communication needs (Hájková, 2013, 2014; Štěpáník & Chvál, 2016; Štěpáník et al., 2020; Zimová, 2012, 2016).

The basic shortcomings of traditional grammar teaching are the atomization of the curriculum, where there is no interconnection of knowledge and understanding of language as a system; the inappropriate inclusion of individual linguistic phenomena due to the age of pupils and their cognitive maturity; inappropriate teaching methods leading to mechanical learning; insufficient justification of the curriculum for both pupils and teachers, which results in a lack of motivation; lack of semantic-pragmatic approach and lack of focus on the functional use of language knowledge in communication (for more details see Štěpáník, 2020).

The emphasis on the communication goal does not mean resignation to a thorough knowledge of the functioning of language system. Especially abroad there are already studies that prove that functional grammar teaching is meaningful for the development of pupils' communication skills (Fontich & Camps, 2014; Jones et al., 2013; Myhill et al., 2012). For the Czech Republic see Štěpáník & Chvál (2016).

However, it is not only systematic factors that create the situation described above. In addition to a strong tradition in language teaching, we see another cause. From what we have said about the subjective theories of teachers, we assume that one of the key reasons is in the teachers themselves, in their subjective theories

partly based on their own learning experience in a traditional way at school. This is transmitted from generation to generation, despite innovative teaching at universities and the Framework Educational Programme (hereinafter FEP, in Czech RVP *Rámcový vzdělávací program*), which emphasizes the communication approach. The teachers of Czech language grow up in their environment base on formally conceived grammar, and it is probable that even innovatively conceived teacher programmes at universities cannot fundamentally change their thinking. However, this phenomenon has not yet been thoroughly studied in the Czech environment and therefore deserves increased attention.²

RESEARCH INTO THE SUBJECTIVE THEORIES OF CZECH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Our goal (as well as the goal of our dissertation) is to find out what subjective theories about the teaching of grammar are held by experienced teachers of the Czech language and to verify the extent to which the declared theories coincide with teaching practice. We want to use the method of individual interviews over the questionnaire with unfinished statements, interviews and observation of lessons. Since our research is at the beginning, in this article we will present only the piloting of two questionnaires with unfinished statements.

The First Probe

The goal of the first probe was to find out what general subjective theories are held by Czech language teachers. We identified the following research questions.

1. According to the teachers, what confirms the ideal mastery of the subject?
2. According to the teachers, what is the insurmountable minimum for mastering the subject?
3. What do teachers see as the meaning of teaching this subject?
4. What should the revised FEP look like?³

We reformulated these questions into a short questionnaire with unfinished statements. We then piloted the questionnaire on a research sample of 20

² The Framework Educational Programme FEP is the generally binding framework for the creation of the school curriculum, which each school prepares itself. The FEP is relatively free and allows schools to create a specific programme according to their own interests and needs.

³ FEP is currently being revised (the original FEP comes from 2007); the approved version should be implemented in early 2023. The revision follows the *Strategy of Educational Policy of the Czech Republic 2030+*, which was approved by the Government of the Czech Republic in November 2020. It stipulates, among other things, the need for a thorough revision of the content of school education towards competence targeting.

respondents. These were mostly the experienced and active teachers who signed up for an afternoon course of further education for pedagogical staff, which means that they were willing to devote their free time to further education and transfer of experience in Czech language didactics.

The respondents were primary, lower and upper-secondary school teachers (5 teachers taught only at primary and lower-secondary school, 11 only at upper-secondary school and 4 at both types of schools). The length of practice of the examined subjects had a large range; half had teaching experience of less than 10 years, the other half ranged from 11 to 36 years of experience. We were aware of differences in experience of these teachers which could interfere with their answers, but in this phase of research, we wanted to firstly test our research tool – the special questionnaire. As seen below, we discovered some interesting findings which could, of course, be examined more thoroughly.

Respondents received this questionnaire with unfinished statements:

1. When the pupil has mastered Czech, it means...
2. The purpose of teaching Czech for me is...
3. I insist that pupils in my subject ...
4. Revised FEP in Czech should ...

They had 20 minutes to complete it, working directly on the questionnaire form. Then I collected the questionnaires and coded individual answers. I used the open coding method. Subsequently, I clustered and analysed individual codes.

The Results of the Research: Knowledge versus Skills

The completion of the first statement “When the pupil has mastered Czech, it means...” showed that the most important criterion of ideal mastery of Czech language is the practical acquisition and application of acquired knowledge (*skills*). 14 teachers interviewed finished the statement in this sense. Examples of some statements: “...is able to ask meaningfully, can ask questions and draw conclusions; ...can formulate her thoughts, find relations and connections, use language as means of communication in the relation and function to the concrete communication situation”; “...can express himself/herself correctly, literally, adequately, cultivated, he understands a literary text and is able to formulate own thoughts about literary text”.

Only in 6 answers was there a clear requirement of *knowledge*, but always in combination with *skills*, for example: “...he orientates in terms; he has “little”

review about literature"; "... he has an overview of Czech and world literature"; "...he likes reading and can interpret the reading being aware of the context of author's work, literary and cultural context"; "...he applies in working with the text knowledge from all (areas) of Czech language teaching – grammar, stylistics, literature".

The second statement "The purpose of teaching Czech for me is..." confirmed the preference for skills over knowledge. In 15 answers, the teachers mentioned the purpose in the development of skills: "... formulation of own ideas"; "...formulation of own opinion"; "...thinking about the text read"; "...the ability to express herself orally and in writing"; "...reach of language richness"; "...communication skills"; "...critical thinking"; etc. Only in 5 responses an emphasis on the transfer of knowledge appeared, but again always in combination with skills.

In this statement 10 teachers wrote that the purpose of teaching must be interest in the subject or love for it, 4 teachers highlighted the relation to the mother tongue, 5 to literature (reading) and 2 to interest in the subject in general. Due to the situation in the Czech context, I wondered if the language was not preferred by only the primary and lower-secondary school teachers and the literature by the upper-secondary teachers, as Czech upper-secondary schools teach mainly literature and language is lagging behind, while in primary and lower-secondary schools it is the other way around. However, this does not follow from the questionnaires.

The third statement "I insist that pupils in my subject..." confirmed the emphasis on skills which was mentioned by 9 teachers: "...understood the text"; "...are able to express themselves orally and in writing"; "...use the language functionally in a certain situation"; etc. 6 teachers stated that they insist on knowledge, although it must be said that again it was combined with skills.

The accent of 5 teachers specifically on reading was surprising. The reason may be due to insufficient reading literacy. In international literacy surveys, especially the 2009 PISA survey, Czech pupils did not show good results. Although the activities of the National Institute for Education, the Czech School Inspection and some movements with an international dimension (RWCT) is very lively and the number of professional publications on this topic is very high, problems persist in school practice (Šebesta & Hedin, 2019).

Many of the answers focused on the pupils and their feelings. 6 teachers mentioned that they insist that the pupil is successful or be positively motivated. 3

teachers insisted that the pupil really understood the matter and the meaning of language teaching.

Communication Approach

In many completions, the word *communication* resonated across all the statements. It appeared in the majority of questionnaires (12) which theoretically fulfil the innovative recommendations of subject didactics towards the communicative-functional approach. Respondents mentioned that they perceived the development of communication skills and adequate using of language in concrete communication situations as the meaning of teaching Czech and what they insist on (8 teachers). However, some statements were very vague and unclear, with formulations such as: “*The purpose of teaching Czech is for me the art of communication*”; “*...communication with other people*”; “*When the pupil “knows (something)” in Czech, it means that she can communicate it in sentence*”.

The last question was related to the teachers’ understanding of FEP. It served as a control question because this plan is so loose that it allows the application of the communication approach, and in addition emphasizes it. Completions of the statement “*Revised FEP in Czech should...*” brought surprising results in relation with this. Only one teacher would like to keep FEP in a similar form as it is today. 3 statements were unclear (“*Revised FEP should always be a benefit*”) and the other 16 teachers had different requirements for changes (“*...larger hourly allowance of the Czech language*”; “*...be more current*”; “*...give greater freedom*”; “*... put emphasis on the development of reading*”; “*... have a smaller scope of curriculum*”). 6 teachers explicitly called for the communication aspect, communication skills or communication education to be strengthened in the revised FEP.

Interpretation of Results of the First Probe

The completions of the first 3 statements lead to the conclusion that many teachers are aware of the need to connect theory with practice and declare an emphasis on skills. They often mentioned communication skills, the ability to communicate. The vagueness of some statements led us to consider whether the word *communication* was an apparent acceptance of curricular changes and new didactics approaches. This was partly confirmed by the last statement on FEP, in which – as mentioned above – several teachers called for an emphasis on the communication approach.

This indicates a misunderstanding both of FEP and of its possibilities (Rys-ová, 2007). This plan is free enough for the communication approach to be applied. In addition, the Czech educational system also allows each school to compile its

own specific school curriculum where the communication approach can be emphasized. But the breadth of the teachers' answers suggest that they do not realize this (*"The revised FEP in Czech should much more emphasise the development of communication skills and link language teaching and communication, it means grammar and writing"*). Some reject the freedom (*"...I would return to the previous strict curriculum, FEP is complex, incomprehensible, confusing..."*). And some others, on the other hand, are more in tune with it (*"...it should be free enough for each teacher to put his/her personality into it, but at the same time meet requirements on knowledge and competences"*).

It can indicate ignorance as well: teachers do not know the basic curricular documents or have not studied them sufficiently. The above findings also show the persistence of subjective theories, and that it is necessary to proceed teaching according to the textbook and teach all the matter, especially in terms of grammar (*"The revised FEP in Czech should revise the content of the curriculum, especially the part concerning sentence members, types of subordinate clauses, it should require less theory..."*)

The results of the first probe showed that teachers are aware of the necessity to teach pupils not only knowledge but especially skills. This tendency was proved by the completions of first 3 statements. The results suggest also a misunderstanding of the communication approach, which was proved especially by the completions of the fourth statement.

The unfinished statements were intentionally relatively free, offering freedom and breadth of answers. At the same time, the breadth did not always allow us a clear interpretation. We therefore decided to create a more detailed questionnaire with clearly targeted questions on grammar teaching and the communication approach.

The Second Probe

The following part describes a pilot probe, preliminary research to our dissertation. We set ourselves two research questions:

1. What are the subjective theories of grammar of experienced lower-secondary school teachers?
2. Do these declared theories correspond to the teaching practice of these teachers?

I will present now the answers to question 1 by a teacher at the lower-secondary school; she has many years of experience, stating herself that she has been teaching for more than 15 years. The questionnaire has three sections: objectives;

curriculum; and the overall approach to teaching and methods. It also consists of unfinished statements which are formulated more precisely in order to find what subjective theories of grammar this teacher has and how her teaching methods correspond to them. The questionnaire was supplemented by an interview.

Interpretation of the Results of the Second Probe

Objectives (of Czech Language Teaching). It seems that the respondent is in tune with the communicative-functional approach, which should be based on a knowledge of language as a system and at the same time develop language skills (ability to read with understanding, cultivated expression, critical thinking):

“I think that the goal of teaching the Czech language is to make a pupil... achieve reading literacy, master orthography and be able to express himself/herself in a cultivated way (...) The most important thing for life is for students of Czech language to take away... a positive attitude towards reading and critical thinking (...) I do not insist that all students in the subject Czech language... acquire a formal knowledge of grammatical and literary theory and all concepts.

From the theoretical language system, the respondent mentions only the orthographic standard, but from other answers: *“I see the meaning of grammar teaching in understanding the structure of sentences and clauses and their correct formulation in order to express the idea accurately and clearly, in understanding the meaning and structure of the word and in practical mastery of orthographic standard”*.

And from the subsequent interview it is clear that she strives for systemic knowledge of all language levels. This is fully in line with recommendations of modern didactics. Communication-oriented teaching not systemically and randomly conceived may lose effectiveness. At the same time, the respondent is aware that for some pupils, the complete acquisition of language knowledge is attainable. This is also reflected in the last statement, which, however, also touches the deeper problem of overloading the curriculum with grammar (see in more detail below).

Curriculum (teaching Czech language and grammar). On the other hand, statements in this section document rather the traditional approach as we have described it above: *“When teaching Czech, I prioritise the teaching... of grammar, I devote half of my time to it, and in the second half of the time allowance I teach communication and composition and literature”*. This separation of grammar teaching from communication and composition (style) and literature is typical for Czech education, but unfortunately it only strengthens the atomization of the

curriculum and the concept of grammar teaching in which grammatical phenomena are practised on isolated sentences.

In the interview, the respondent confirmed that she strictly plans the lessons during the week (two lessons of grammar, one lesson of communication and composition and one lesson of literature), but she is aware of the usefulness of connecting writing and grammar, to which she was inspired by Critical Thinking trainings. In teaching, however, she adheres to a more traditional approach, where children learn to write individual stylistic genres according to the order in textbook (she gave as examples biography, narration, reflexion), which means an emphasis on form rather than the purpose of communication, and subordinates stylistic procedure to it:⁴ *“I consider a fundamental mistake in Czech to be...the teaching of theoretical knowledge regardless of its use in practical life”*.

It is interesting that in this statement we expected rather an answer which considered a mistake by a pupil to be fundamental. However, this completion of the statement, including an honest and spontaneous answer in the interview, pointed out one of the biggest problems in teaching the Czech language in lower-secondary school.

When we asked for a specific example in the interview, the respondent stated that she is most bothered by the overload of the theory and grammatical terms that most pupils will not use in practical life but to which, because of the entrance exam (to secondary school), they must devote time. As an example, she mentioned sentence members like verbal attribute and apposition or various types of attributes, verb classes, various poetic figures and types of rhymes. Pupils can identify the verbal attribute or personification in an isolated sentence, but they do not understand the text as a whole.

There are two reasons for this. As explained above, the tradition of the grammatical-normative approach is strongly rooted in Czech education. Although the curriculum does not directly prescribe it, teachers are mostly convinced that pupils should master all the language levels during lower-secondary school, including the professional terminology. In particular, the syntactic level, which is the most cognitively demanding, is very difficult for them. In the teaching of the sentence,

⁴ Critical Thinking is an organization that promotes the Reading and Writing to Critical Thinking programme in the Czech Republic and organizes trainings for teachers.

self-serving formalism and detachment from practical needs of expression have been repeatedly criticized for many years.

In the current usual school practice in teaching syntax, the mechanized parsing exercise prevail (Čechová, 2012; Čechová et al., 1996; Čechová & Styblík, 1998; Zimová, 2012, 2016). Similarly, other authors (Kostečka 1993; Šebesta, 2005; Štěpáník et al., 2019) draw attention to the ineffective teaching of the Czech language and emphasise the need for communication focus of teaching. Many pupils thus resign themselves to not understanding of sentence structure already at lower-secondary school, which later accompanies them in other levels of education. It often happens that even students in tertiary education admit that they have never fully understood sentence structure and that they miss its purpose.

The second reason stated by the respondent herself is the preparation of pupils for uniform entrance tests for secondary school:

“When my pupil asks me what the point is of recognizing subordinate clauses, I answer... for pupils who will pass entrance exam it is necessary without any discussion; for all, to develop logical thinking, understanding of the structure of sentences (using graphic presentation), especially towards punctuation and meaningful and comprehensible expression”.

Here, too, there is a certain misunderstanding of uniform entrance exam tests. Although we could have many reservations about them, out of the total number of 30 tasks, traditional grammar is usually verified in a maximum of 5, and the remaining tasks are mainly various types of work with text. Thus here also teachers' subjective theories play an important role – not only traditional pressure on teachers to prepare pupils for the secondary school entrance exams (a highly important exam that determines the future employment of pupils), but especially their own understanding of test content.

In interview the respondent added that she is most interested in the textbooks published by Nová škola (New School publishing house): *“Textbooks are for me... the default during teaching. The advantage is an interactive version, printed versions are necessary for homework”.* According to her, they offer an interactive version, but above all a number of interesting exercises for teaching language, communication and composition, and literature, as well as current and interesting topics for children. However, according to Adam (2020), this series of textbooks teach the language system without regard to the communicative validity of its elements, giving simplified or even erroneous interpretations of grammar,

with tautological definitions and present wrong solutions in the key to the exercises.

The overall approach to teaching. In the last part of our questionnaire, we focused on the understanding and application of the communication approach recommended by modern didactics and by FEP. The respondent does not understand this approach, it only means more space for mutual communication and random implementation of communication situations: *“The communication approach to teaching means... space for pupils to express themselves during teaching, feedback, openness of a teacher to any decent and appropriate question, suggestion or remark”*.

It partly confirmed the following completion: *“For me, the functional task in teaching Czech is ... one, that aims to require practical knowledge and skills”*. When she was asked if she could give a specific example, she said that *“it is about pupils being able to create a sentence, to fill in spelling correctly, find an error in a text”*. In addition, she emphasised that she likes bug-finding exercises and also tasks leading to independent thinking and understanding of the text.

In such tasks we are not sure if they can lead to independent thinking. On the contrary, there is a clear focus on the prescriptiveness of teaching. Pupils do not create anything and are not expected to express their own ideas, they do grammatical exercises only mechanically and look for errors in texts.

We do not see the potential for independent creative work even in the statement: *“it is about pupils being able to create a sentence”*. Moreover, we lack application of preconception: a native speaker can create a sentence quite naturally. The respondent was not able to elaborate more in the interview (*I think that the best way to teaching grammar is...in the form of interactive exercises, presentations, teamwork and short stylistic tasks*). She only repeated that she was interested in Critical Thinking trainings and the methods of connecting the teaching of grammar and of writing (*“Use three adjectives in your writing, one of them unusual*).

Another statement. Some answers suggest that she uses these methods and forms to a limited extent (*“I think about alternative methods and forms of work...that they help to diversify teaching but are time consuming for a teacher to prepare and for pupils to understand and accept”*), with vague considerations (*“I extend my methodological repertoire by... using the trainings of Further education of pedagogical staff”*). The respondent says that she uses these new methods and activities, but that she cannot devote hours to their preparation because she must

devote a lot of time to correcting pupils' written work. Therefore, she welcomes trainings offering such methods and activities that could be used in practice immediately and in which pupils work together offering feedback to each other. She also says that she cannot regularly devote much space to these activities in class, because she would not be able to explain the required amount of grammatical theory.

This again points to the above-mentioned problem of the teaching of Czech language, which is based on a grammatical-normative approach, on textbooks containing a large number of theoretical language concepts and terms, and at the same time on the teacher's belief that she must explain them all. Hence, the communication approach is not applied (*"If most pupils still do not understand the curriculum, I will try....to repeat the curriculum and simplify the assignments of tasks and outputs as much as possible"*). We would expect the teacher to try to start from a concrete texts, put the matter in context in a specific communication situation, show its functionality, etc., but she adheres to her scheme of explanation.

At the end of the interview the respondent states very spontaneously that *"we are still going on in the socialist type of education, we memorize, and it is not for life"*. The "socialist type of education" is for her the state of education before 1989 (Velvet Revolution), which was not opened to new trends. The methods and forms of work were based on transmission and the instructive model of management prevailed. Teaching was conducted mostly frontally, and the content was more formal. The respondent imagined that education would change significantly, and language teaching would be more in line with the practical needs of language users.

CONCLUSION

The findings led us to the preliminary conclusion that teachers are aware of the need to develop skills in pupils and to focus teaching on communication in general, if they are to have a good command of the Czech language. They also subconsciously realize that their mother tongue teaching does not fulfil the communication aim which they intuitively perceive as necessary. While they do not fully understand the complexity of communication approach, on the other they do not have a clear enough idea of what the communication concept of teaching really means, and at the same time they are looking for external culprits in the education system: in the lack of time, the number of children, the overloaded curricula, school plans, etc. It seems that *communication* became a buzz word for teachers and embodied the required change.

At the same time however, we encounter a misunderstanding of the communication approach in both probes. Thus, teachers know when it comes to news in teaching Czech, it will be communication-oriented teaching. However, their statements show that they understand the communication approach in teaching Czech as exercises or tasks focused on communication, the speeches of pupils and the teacher's communication with them. They reduce it to oral expressions, whether monologue or dialogical ones, but do not perceive it as a complex and completely different approach to teaching, which affects both the choice of content and the way of didactic mediation to students.

Čechová & Styblík (1998) warn against confusing the communication focus with mere random, unsystematic inclusion of any communication events. Communication-based teaching must be systemic and functionally interconnecting various language levels as well as teaching language, literature, and communication and composition. According to Štěpáník et al. (2020),

Teaching must provide not only a descriptive, but also an explanative and functional view of structure and functioning of language – so that pupils gain knowledge of language means and rules, but are also adequately guided to understand that language works on certain principles and how these principles work in real communication in expressing the intended conclusions. (p. 11)

The teaching is based on real texts and communication situations in which the teachers explain the functional use of language means. In this sense, language becomes a necessary means of expression and the goal is to improve it, leading to a better understanding of communication or self-expression, written or oral. Communication targeting means a total change in the culture of teaching and learning in the mother tongue.

These probes provide interesting findings regarding the understanding of the communication approach; discrepancies in individual statements and a comparison of thoughtful written answers and more spontaneous interviews indicate that despite the declared modern teaching methods and emphasis on practical skills, specific teaching may look different.

Some other research confirms that primary and lower-secondary school teachers announce the active involvement of pupils, but at the same time they refuse to use methods to realize it (Šed'ová, 2012). Also interesting in the context of our focus on the communication approach is the example of a debate about *discussion*, which primary and lower-secondary school teachers understand as a tool to develop communication competence, but at the same time they are sceptical of its use

in teaching, because pupils do not have the knowledge of how to lead it or sufficient communication skills (Šed'ová et al., 2012, 2020).

Therefore, in our further research we would like to focus on more thorough examination of subjective theories of grammar on a larger sample of respondents – experienced Czech language teachers at lower-secondary school – on their understanding of the communicative-functional approach. We believe that it will also be very beneficial to find how this approach is presented and how it is applied. Also using interviews and questionnaires, we will examine how the communicative-functional approach is declared, and through the methods of observations and further interviews we will verify its understanding and its implementation in teaching.

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IVANA HURYTOVÁ

Ivana Hurytová graduated from the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, now she is Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Education at the same university. She has rich experience in education, from direct teaching Czech language at various degrees as well as from administrating educational projects in a foundation supporting higher education.

ivana.hurytova@pedf.cuni.cz
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0543-5615>



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