

Grammar as an “Art of Lettes” in Foreign Language Teaching (A Study of Teaching English Verb Tenses in Lower and Upper Secondary Schools)

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Abstract:

Introduction: This paper focuses on the issue of teaching verb tenses in Slovak lower and upper secondary schools – in particular, on teaching three grammatical tenses (Present Simple, Present Continuous, and Simple Present Perfect) and the learner’s ability to use them. It also identifies the mistakes made by the learners in the research sample, causes of their mistakes, and suggests ways of eliminating these errors.

Methods: The paper presents the research data collected using quantitative (questionnaire and achievement test) and qualitative (lesson observation and semi-structured interview) methods. The data are analysed, compared, and conclusions for school practice are drawn.

Results: The main research findings show how the three tenses are taught, identify the impact of the ways they are taught on the ability of lower and upper secondary school learners to use them, and outline the errors they commit. The authors seek to explain the errors and suggest possible ways of eliminating them.

Discussion: The current study is compared to research data presented by Gadušová and Hart’anská (2002), Hlava (2012) and Lojová (2016). All of them consider the practical application of grammatical functions significant in spontaneous and meaningful communication.

Limitations: Regarding the limitations of the research findings, the research sample of five interviewed teachers is too small either to make generalizations or to claim that the conducted research is fully reliable.

Conclusions: The research findings demonstrate that teaching the verb tenses in lower and upper secondary schools lacks sufficient contextualised communicative activities for practising the discussed grammar items.

Key words: grammar, comparative analysis, Present Simple Tense (PST), Present Continuous Tense PCT), Simple Present Perfect Tense (SPPT)

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1 Introduction

Grammar is a useful tool which structures our ideas in a logical, coherent and transparent way. It is one of the most controversial aspects of teaching a foreign language. Grammarians love it, teachers are hesitant, while for learners it may even be a nightmare. But without grammar, it is impossible for anyone to speak the language accurately and respect the standardized language norms and usage. Harper (2001-2016) in his etymological dictionary indicates that grammar is the “*art of letters*” meaning that it is not perceived as the letters on the paper but rather as a “*mental system that allows humans to form and interpret words and sentences of their language*” (Popping, 2000, p. 164). Schachl (2013) proposes several principles which may contribute to creating more long-lasting brain associations after gaining knowledge. These principles include mainly the necessity to interconnect a new grammar topic with the previous one maintaining a cyclical process of repetition and revision. As a result, information will be linked and stored in learner’s long-term memory in the form of well-organised structures (Schachl, 2013, pp. 62-63). Similarly, Hartánská (2004) emphasizes that teaching foreign language grammar must involve not only the manipulation of the form or structure but also an orientation to its usage in order to develop the learner’s internal (mental) grammatical system in full. During the process of acquiring grammar, the mistakes made by the learner give the teacher important feedback about the cognitive organization of the learner’s grammar, and their way of thinking (Schachl, 2013, p. 79). There are other recognized applied linguists who deal with the issue from a similar perspective, including: Celce-Murcia (1988), Alexander (1990), Aitken (1992), Harmer (1994), Ur (1999), Eastwood (1999), Repka (2001), Gadušová and Hartánská (2002), Murphy (2004), Gower, Phillips and Walters (2005), Hewings (2005), Yule (2006), Turnbull et al. (2006), Bygrave (2012), and many others.

Another issue requiring clarification in foreign language teaching, as mentioned by Repka (1997), is the relationship between the development of grammatical, and communicative competences, as a preference for the latter is still quite noticeable in schools. Though the idea is often expressed that grammar is a communicative system directly participating in the creation of meanings and their distribution in a message organisation (both oral and written), the functions and meanings of grammatical structures, and the appropriateness of grammatical form with respect to contextualised communicative aims should definitely be in the foreground of teaching practices. Teachers usually consider that grammar rules, practising exercises and work with texts are primary aims of any foreign language lesson. However, tasks aimed at practising the introduced grammar items (structures and forms) together with the explanation of the meaning and functioning of the form in context both serve as the means of developing communicative skills which, in fact, are presumed to be the prior goal in teaching. Learners as well as teachers should realise that grammar not only groups its elements in order to be seen as grammatically correct, but also influences the meanings they convey (Gadušová & Hartánská, 2002). Just as in real life, grammar is a natural and inseparable part of communicative performance; it should not be separated into two different phases of a lesson in classroom teaching as observations of common practice show to be the case. Marks (2014) supports the importance of effective communication giving special emphasis on its simplicity and meaningfulness in a teaching process (any “specialised professional training” is required). He recommends to prepare at least three questions in advance which will serve as a feedback not only for the teacher but also for the learners.

The questions should be answered immediately at the lesson because of current grammar perception and further progress within the grammatical topic (Marks, 2014, pp. 49-50). In this study, though, attention is focused on the teaching and learning of three tenses - Present Simple, Present Continuous and Simple Present Perfect, as they are the most frequent ones in everyday communicative acts and all of them should be acquired and practically used by the learners who have achieved A2 level of language proficiency. Before analysing and discussing the research data collected by the authors of three diploma theses (Bertóková, 2016; Horváthová, 2016; Pojezdalová, 2016) a brief outline will be presented of those functions of the three tenses (which in fact have much wider repertoire of use) that all learners are expected to learn and acquire (for A2 level of language proficiency) during their studies in primary and lower secondary schools.

The Present Simple Tense is perhaps the most essential grammatical tense, the form of which learners encounter on a regular basis. Slovak learners easily acquire its structure because it requires knowledge of just the basic form of the full verb except in the third person singular, but a problem arises when they have to use either its negative or interrogative forms.

As for its use, during the early stages of learning, learners of English are instructed that the Present Simple Tense is used to express:

- something that happens repeatedly and on an habitual basis, i.e. when somebody does something subconsciously and it is hard to stop doing (e.g. *I usually go out on Sundays.; He bites his nails.*);
- something that is generally and consistently true (e.g. *The earth goes around the sun.*);
- how often or how regularly things are done, i.e. activities which are frequently done having the same amount of space and time between each part or thing (e.g. *I have my breakfast at seven o'clock every morning.*).

Later, learners are introduced to the use of the Present Simple Tense for future activities which:

- are either timetabled or programmed (e.g. *We fly to Paris next month.*);
- express observations, declarations (e.g. *I work as a doctor.*), instructions (e.g. *Take two spoons of sugar.*), and sports commentaries (e.g. *Dominika serves to Petra.*);
- are introduced with conjunctions like *when, before, as soon as, if* and *whether*: (e.g. *We will come and pick you up as soon as you call. If you call me, I will tell you.*)

A characteristic linguistic feature which all continuous tenses, including PCT, share is the suffix *-ing* being added to a full verb. "*The morpheme -ing marks a verb as referring to an on-going process or activity rather than a stable, state or completed action, for example: 'He is working.'*" as opposed to "*He worked.*" Singleton (2000, p. 37). Though grammarians are aware of the fact that PCT does not refer only to actions taking place now, as e.g. Harmer (1994) who states: "... a sentence in the Present Continuous Tense does not always refer to the present" (Harmer, 1994, p. 9), and consider it overgeneralization or simplification, this is the first usage of the tense introduced in school teaching. The other usages of PCT introduced at level A1 and A2 are when describing:

- a temporary activity over a longer period (e.g. *Do you think I look any thinner? I'm slimming.*);
- an annoying habit (e.g. *She is always coming late.*);
- a fixed plan or diary note (e.g. *I am having an appointment with the dentist tomorrow at 10 a.m.*).

The Simple Present Perfect Tense is the tense which is neither exclusively associated with the present, nor with the past and therefore it may be misleading and difficult for Slovak learners to acquire, as there is no equivalent tense in the system of the Slovak language (Repka, 2001). The problem becomes even more difficult, as the incorrect use of a tense instead of the Present Perfect does not prevent appropriate perception of the communicated message. If a learner replaces SPPT, e.g. in the sentence "*I have lived here since 2009.*", with the PST, as in, "*I live here since 2009.*", an interlocutor will correctly comprehend the message semantically, but morphologically this grammatical tense remains incorrect.

For learners, the usage of the tense is usually defined as the one which refers mainly to:

- the "*past with present relevance or effect*" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 34) (e.g. *Look, I cannot pay for the dinner I have left my wallet at home.*);
- the past with specified and unspecified time continuing to the present or the future (Harmer, 2007) (e.g. *I have lived here since my birth.*);
- "*recently completed actions, personal experiences, changes which have happened or for accomplished past actions connected to the present with stated or unstated time reference*" (Evans & Dooley, 2009, p. 159) (e.g. *I have sent the letter this morning. They have seen the film and can tell you more details about it.*).

2 Methodology

The study analyses and interprets the data collected by three diploma students as part of their empirical research dealing with the efficiency of teaching three tenses - Present Simple, Present Continuous and Simple Present Perfect, in Slovak schools. The focus of the data analysis is on three aspects of the issue - ways of teaching the tenses, mistakes made by the learners, causes of the mistakes and possibilities for their elimination.

The research was conducted during the 2015-2016 school year in 20 schools (5 primary, 5 lower secondary, 10 upper secondary - of which 4 were vocational and 6 were grammar schools). The list of participating schools is in the Appendix. The schools were chosen deliberately in the proximity of the researchers' homes. In the research four methods were used: questionnaire, achievement test, lesson observation and semi-structured interview. Not all the methods were used by every researcher. The authors dealing with PST and PCT used a questionnaire for teachers and a questionnaire for learners. The number of questions in the latter was in both cases approximately two thirds of the number of questions in the questionnaire for teachers, though the researcher dealing with PCT used more questions (14:9) than her colleague who was researching PST (11:7). The aim of both the questionnaires was to find out about the ways the tenses are taught as well as about the difficulties the learners experience and the mistakes they make. Moreover, to get a deeper insight into how well the learners have mastered and are able to use the two tenses, discrete point achievement tests for different levels of proficiency (A1 and A2) were designed and applied. A2 tests were used both in final

grades of the lower secondary schools as well as in the first grades of the upper secondary schools.

The other two methods were used to investigate the situation with SPPT teaching, acquisition, and use. As with the two researchers working with the questionnaire, the third researcher focused her attention on the ways SPPT is taught and learners' difficulties with it. For these purposes nine specific areas were observed in 10 lessons taught by different teachers and in the designed semi-structured interview 5 teachers were asked 11 questions.

Though the number of research participants is not in the thousands - they are in the hundreds (for learners) and tens (for teachers), the research data were collected from various regions of the country and from various schools and reflect the situation in the research field quite realistically and objectively. As stated earlier, the number of schools involved in the research was 20. The total number of teachers questioned by the researchers was 110 and the number of learners involved was 555. Detailed information about the number of participating teachers and learners in the research topics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of teachers and learners participating in the research

<u>Type of school</u>	<u>N° of schools</u>	<u>Present Simple Tense</u>		<u>Present Continuous Tense</u>		<u>Simple Present Perfect Tense</u>	
		<u>N° of teachers</u>	<u>N° of learners</u>	<u>N° of teachers</u>	<u>N° of learners</u>	<u>N° of teachers</u>	<u>N° of learners</u>
<i>Primary</i>	5	8	104	11	-	-	-
<i>Lower secondary</i>	5	17	103	19	73	4	36
<i>Upper secondary</i>	10	26	101	20	47	5	91
<i>Total</i>	20	51	308	50	120	9	127

3 Results

3.1 Ways of teaching the tenses

The first area the researchers focused on was the teachers' ways of teaching the tenses. The collected research data were based on the use of quantitative (questionnaire for teachers and learners) and qualitative (observation and interview) research methods. First the researchers wanted to find out how teachers plan their grammar lessons, and what materials they use. To obtain the information, a question with four options about the resources being used was included in the questionnaire for teachers. The respondents could mark more than one option if needed. As the data shows (see Table 2), there was a substantial difference in the use of reference materials, depending on the tense being taught. When teaching the PST, which is conceptually identical with its L1 equivalent, the findings revealed that the teachers felt quite confident and they relied on their own knowledge, including Internet resources (53%) or they just looked for support in students' books (67%). Very few of them looked for other sources of information, as, for example, in grammar reference books (12%) or teacher's books (4%). The situation

was quite different when teachers were to introduce the PCT. The reason for this is quite logical - the tense does not exist in the learners' L1 language system. Here just slightly more than one third of the addressed teachers (38%) relied on their own knowledge (including Internet sources). The use of the other three sources was more or less balanced; teachers used teacher's books (48%), grammar reference books (44%) and students' books (42%) almost equally. The data offered another interesting view on the preferred use of the students' book (hereinafter referred to as SB) and the teacher's book (hereinafter referred to as TB). Considerably fewer teachers relied on students' books when presenting PCT - 42% compared to 67% of the teachers who used them while introducing PST. Even though the difference between TB and SB use when presenting the PCT was not that significant, preference for the TB is visible (6% more), notwithstanding the surprising difference in its use for introducing PST in comparison with PCT. It is also worth noting that the above-mentioned growth in teachers' dependence on their current textbook was reflected in a decrease in their self-confidence to use their own knowledge (a decrease from 53% to 38%).

When learning new structures, it is evident that learners are accustomed to being guided by student books, along with writing down notes. Three quarters (76%) of the learners used the SB and 94% of them copied grammar notes from the blackboard directly into their exercise books, whereas the rest of the learners wrote their notes into worksheets. Returning to the findings in the PST research, the SB was the second most frequent teaching aid followed by blackboard use as a useful tool for presentation (see Table 2). Obviously, the teachers inclined towards print materials – mostly student's books – the use of which supports a traditional deductive approach to teaching. The research results showed that 55% of the teachers used an inductive and almost three quarters (73%) used a deductive approach to teaching. This corresponds to the 74% of learners who declared the deductive way of teaching which is nearly the same number as in the teachers' answers (73%). Despite such similarities in the data, the reality may not be as simple (for example, the learners may not have fully understood the difference between a deductive and inductive approach, even though it was explained in the questionnaire) as a similar proportion of the learners (69%) claimed that the teacher first introduces examples and their task is to discover how the structure is formed and used. Thus, the learners reflected a clearer picture of teachers' approaches to teaching the tenses (compared to 55% of the teachers).

To be even more concrete, direct verbal explanation and blackboard notes were listed as the most frequent techniques used for tense presentation as 57% of teachers and 59% of learners marked verbal explanation with the adverbial "always" and the same adverbial was used for blackboard notes by 43% of teachers and 44% of learners. The other options for presentation, such as dialogues, translations, videos, games, songs, own materials, were listed only in a very few cases (e.g. by 3 out of 51 teachers and 3 out of 308 learners).

Table 2

Approaches to presenting verb tenses - teachers' and learners' responses

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Sub-aspect</u>	<u>Present Simple</u>		<u>Present Continuous</u>	
		<u>Tense</u>		<u>Tense</u>	
		<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Learners</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Learners</u>
		<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Resources</i>	Student's book	67	-	42	-
	Teacher's book	4	-	48	-
	Grammar reference book	12	-	44	-
	Teacher's own knowledge and resources	53	-	38	-
<i>Approach</i>	Deductive	73	74	92	-
	Inductive	55	69	59	36
	Practising the introduced structure	94	93	-	-
<i>Explanation</i>	Mainly verbal	57	59	58	67
	With written notes on a board	43	44	-	56

Lesson observation was the method adopted to examine the ways of teaching the SPPT. Evidence indicates that the inductive (implicit) approach was favoured over the deductive (explicit) alternative (10 of the observed teachers used the inductive style). The research findings might be considered to have revealed a highly positive approach, but the teachers' answers uncovered a reality other than what was expected and observed. Here are a few of the teachers' responses: "*inductive way of teaching should be used*"; "*we can use it (inductive way of teaching) to make a lesson more interesting also for you*" ("you" indicates the researcher) - teacher at lower secondary school); "*I tried the second one*" ("*the second one*" stands for inductive way of teaching) - teacher at grammar school. Such statements suggest an "ideal" or a wish which should be fulfilled, rather than a natural way of teaching implemented in the everyday teaching process. Teachers felt under pressure that linguists, theoreticians and methodologists "were directing" them to do this. Furthermore, they themselves very often asked the researcher for explanations of what these two descriptions (i.e. the two approaches to teaching a structure) mean in practice. Evidence of confusion in teachers' minds between a deductive and an inductive approach is clearly expressed in the following utterances: "*I tried the second one* (the expression "*the second one*" stands for inductive way of teaching). *It depends on the groups, levels, students' intelligence. But I often explain the rules.*" – a teacher at a grammar school; "*It depends but I think that a more deductive way should be used. It is easier for children and they use it. But in the eighth and ninth grades, it is easier for them to learn grammar inductively. They use the Internet and read a lot; they know grammar but do not know how to use it.*"; "*It is deductively. It needs to be explained to them. They can predict the structure inductively, i.e. find grammar examples and structures in the text, but children do not understand the difference between Past Simple Tense and Simple Present Perfect Tense if I use an inductive approach.*" – teachers at lower secondary schools. Obviously, teachers experience the inductive approach as more successfully applied when learners have

greater awareness of the foreign language system (L2), and the lower the learners' proficiency, the more direct guidance they need. In comparison to the observations, the data obtained from the structured interview revealed some discrepancies: the deductive way of teaching was used by one teacher at lower secondary school and one teacher at grammar school. The same results from the structured interview confirmed that a combination of inductive and deductive ways of teaching were being used. Only one teacher at a grammar school expressed very firmly that she uses an inductive approach "for ninety per cent." "I do not explain the rules to them. There is a text, examples and then theory, usually based on context and examples."

The researchers also investigated and analysed types and frequency of activities and tasks for practising the tenses. Both the groups - teachers and learners, claimed that in their lessons there is much attention paid to practice of the grammar structures. At primary and lower secondary schools mostly mechanical, manipulative exercises were used. In the research analysis the teachers ranked them at the top of frequency (oral drills – first rank, multiple-choice tasks – third rank). On the other hand, at upper secondary schools more communicative activities were the most frequently chosen options (creating own sentences – first rank, transformation tasks – third rank). The only exceptions were gap-filling tasks (at all levels of schools ranked second) whose occurrence in all student books is high. They belong among the easiest types of practice tasks and activities for all concerned: course-book writers, teachers, and learners. Undoubtedly, they are valued highly as a practice format for any kind of grammatical structure.

Nevertheless, learners viewed the situation differently. They claimed their teachers use more mechanical, manipulative exercises, much more frequently in fact than their teachers claimed they do (42% - often), while 38% of the teachers claimed they used them only sometimes. Less than one third (28%) of the teachers claimed they use gap-filling activities but many more (42%) of the learners think so. Similarly, the learners shared the view they are not exposed to that many communicative activities, e.g. games (33% - almost never) or mini-dialogues (47% - sometimes) while their teachers (42%) stated they use games often and also mini-dialogues are often used (46%). The data reviewed above are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency of task/activity use in practising the structure

<u>Type of task/ activity</u>	<u>Frequency of task/activity use at:</u>		<u>Task/activity use - views of:</u>	
	<u>primary and lower secondary schools</u>	<u>upper secondary schools</u>	<u>teachers</u>	<u>learners</u>
			<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
oral drills	1.	6.	38 (sometimes)	42 (often)
gap filling exercises	2.	2.	28 (often)	42 (always)
multiple choice	3.	5.	-	-
creating own sentences	4.	1.	54 (often)	48 (always)
writing dialogues/	5.	4.	-	-

stories				
transformation	6.	3.	44	42
tasks			(sometimes)	(sometimes)
mini-dialogues	-	-	46	47
			(often)	(sometimes)
Games	-	-	42	33
			(often)	(almost never)

Interview results showed that teachers practise structures through a combination of manipulative and communicative exercises. Here are two contrasting claims: “*So firstly, there are exercises and then comes something creative.*”; “*Structural or manipulative exercises are used more often. I tried to use interactive activities to use language in a speaking activity, not only through the given exercises. I usually try to bring additional exercises, for example, communicative activities, problem solving activities and games, so students have to speak.*” - two teachers at upper secondary school. At lower secondary schools, the activities inspiring or developing communication the most were games, pair work activities and work with an interactive whiteboard. At upper secondary schools, the number of communicative activities increased, i.e. teachers used games, questions based on a situation, simulations, interactive whiteboard activities, role playing, video, and others.

3.2 Mistakes made by the learners when using the tenses

The Present Simple Tense is the first of the tenses presented in teaching English, i.e. the teaching and practising of it lasts the longest. It might be expected that learners would thus know it the best and use it without any hesitation. But the truth is somehow different. As the data analysis revealed, learners made a lot of mistakes in its use. The more and the longer they have been learning it, the more mistakes they make (see Table 4). The reason is obvious - learners’ awareness during years of school language learning of the existence of other tenses, their forms and structures function as a growing snow ball. They simply attack memory and cause confusion in the learner’s inner system of the grammar knowledge.

The research confirmed that for both teachers and learners interrogative sentences are the most problematic forms (claimed by 38 teachers out of 51 and 174 out of 308 learners). Comparing the data from the teacher’s questionnaire and the results from the learners’ written tests, the following deviant forms and usages of the tense were identified. As to primary school learners, five frequent mistakes which fully corresponded to the learners’ proficiency level were discovered in the following order of frequency: the omission of the third person singular –s suffix; adding –s suffix to the verb in plural forms; using -ing verb form instead of the verb in PST; incorrect word order and omission of the auxiliary verb in questions. Learners at elementary level made the least number of the mistakes (e.g. *My mother working in an office.*; *Does he nice pictures draw?*; *Does sing well they?*).

Analysis of lower secondary school learners’ mistakes revealed a number of other mistakes though the first three from the elementary level list were identical. At the higher level of proficiency, the other frequently made mistakes were: using the auxiliary verb “is/are” instead of “do/does” in questions and in negative sentences; omission of the auxiliary verb in negative sentences; double indication of the third person; using Present

Continuous, Past Simple and Future Simple instead of Present Simple, and redundancy of auxiliary verb in affirmative sentences.

Learners at upper secondary school level made all the above-mentioned mistakes. In addition, other incorrect usages were: using *-es* suffix instead of *-s* (and vice versa) in the third person singular; using the auxiliary verb “would” + verb instead of Present Simple form of the verb; using the auxiliary verb “would” instead of “will”; using “be” instead of the full verb “is”; using Present Perfect form of the verb instead of Present Simple and omission of the auxiliary verb “do” in questions. What is more, the learners frequently inserted “will” in the first type of conditional, for instance *If you will call the police without any reason, you will get a penalty.*

Table 4

Frequency of learners' mistakes in Present Simple Tense at various levels of school education

<u>Order</u>	<u>Primary school learners</u>	<u>Lower secondary school learners</u>	<u>Upper secondary school learners</u>
1	omission of the <i>-s</i> suffix (in the 3 rd person singular)	adding <i>-s</i> suffix to the verb in plural	using Future Simple instead of Present Continuous
2	adding <i>-s</i> suffix to the verb in plural	omission of the <i>-s</i> suffix (in the 3 rd person singular)	omission of the <i>-s</i> suffix (in the 3 rd person singular)
3	using <i>-ing</i> verb form instead of the Present Simple one	using <i>-ing</i> verb form instead of the Present Simple one	omission of auxiliary verb in negative sentences
4	incorrect word order	using auxiliary verb forms <i>is/are</i> instead of <i>do/does</i> in questions	using Past Simple instead of Present Simple
5	omission of auxiliary verb in questions	omission of auxiliary verb in negative sentences	using Present Continuous instead of Present Simple
6		double indication of the 3 rd person	omission of auxiliary verb in questions
7		using Present Continuous instead of Present Simple	adding <i>-s</i> suffix to the verb in plural
8		using Past Simple instead of Present Simple	using auxiliary verb forms <i>is/are</i> instead of <i>do/does</i> in questions
9		omission of auxiliary verb in questions	redundant use of auxiliary verb in affirmative sentences
10		redundant use of auxiliary verb in affirmative sentences	incorrect word order in questions
11		using auxiliary verb forms <i>is/are</i> instead of <i>do/does</i> in negative sentences	using <i>-es</i> suffix instead of <i>-s</i> in the 3 rd person singular
12		incorrect word order in questions	double indication of the 3 rd person

13	using Future Simple instead of Present Continuous	using the auxiliary verb would + verb instead of Present Simple
14		using <i>-ing</i> form instead of the verb in Present Simple
15		using <i>-s</i> suffix instead of <i>-es</i> in the 3 rd person singular
16		using Present Perfect instead of Present Simple
17		using auxiliary verb forms <i>is/are</i> instead of <i>do/does</i> in negative sentences

Interestingly, learners do not find the structure complicated. The learners involved in the research were asked whether they considered PCT difficult, and a majority of them (64%) did not think so. But the reality, again, was different. When asked to recognise the PCT, to name and use it in another sentence based on the model sentence: *I am answering these questions now*, more than half (56%) of the learners failed. They were not able to identify it correctly and instead of the PCT they identified the tense used in the sentence either as *Present Tense*, *Present Simple*, *Passive Voice* or *Past Simple*.

Even though more than half of the learners (58%) created a grammatically correct sentence, 42% did not write any or they wrote an incorrect one omitting the auxiliary verb *to be*, *-ing* verb suffix or they constructed a grammatically correct sentence, but not containing the right PCT form and thus could not be regarded as a correct fulfilment of the task either, for example *I am a football player*. Thus, the response “no” to the trivial question “*Is this tense difficult for you?*” was far from reality. Likewise, the teachers’ utterances declared the following: *I think that there are clear rules for using this grammatical item.; It is one of the simplest grammatical tenses.; It is easy to explain it because learners understand that we use the Present Continuous Tense when describing actions taking place now*. The rest of the teachers (32%) considered PCT difficult because *in Slovak language there is no equivalent tense*. Furthermore, the functions of the PCT are not as clear to the learners as seems to be the case. Their perception of PCT is quite limited to “actions/activities happening at the moment of speaking” (66%) without realising its other functions in context (as mentioned in the Introduction).

Table 5 shows the frequency of learners’ mistakes in PST and PCT as viewed by teachers. The most frequent mistake in constructing a sentence in the PST was omission of the *-s* suffix (in the 3rd person singular), followed by omission of auxiliary verb *do/does* in questions. The third most frequent mistake was incorrect word order in questions and the fourth typical mistake was omission of *do/does* in negative sentences. Examining the frequency of the most typical mistakes occurring in learners’ production of PCT sentences, the following order can be identified: omission of a form of auxiliary verb *to be* followed by incorrect form use. The third most frequent mistake is omission of verb suffix *-ing* and incorrect use of PCT in context is the fourth typical mistake the learners made. Though the order of frequency of the mistakes identified by the teachers is as discussed above and stated in Table 5, it is worth mentioning that occurrence of many of them was stated as only occasional.

Table 5

Frequency of learners' mistakes in Present Simple Tense and Present Continuous Tense at various levels of school education (as viewed by teachers)

		<u>Type of mistake</u>
<u>Order</u>	<u>Present Simple Tense</u>	<u>Present Continuous Tense</u>
1	omission of the –s suffix (in the 3 rd person singular)	omission of a form of auxiliary verb <i>to be</i>
2	omission of <i>do/does</i> in questions	use of incorrect form of the tense
3	incorrect word order in questions	omission of verb suffix – <i>ing</i>
4	omission of <i>do/does</i> in negative sentences	incorrect use of the tense in context

The Simple Present Perfect Tense (SPPT) is the tense taught at lower secondary schools requiring a certain level of learners' grammatical "maturation". Nevertheless, even such maturation does not guarantee the ability of learners to interiorize the tense in its complexity. Similarly, as in using the PST and PCT, the number and types of mistake increase with the length of its practice, use, and due to its other functions too (see Table 6).

Considering the learners at lower secondary schools, the following mistakes were identified: problems with discrimination between past tense and past participle forms of irregular verbs; omission of auxiliary verbs; the difference between Present Perfect and Past Simple; word order when using adverbials, such as *recently, for, since, never, ever, just, already* and *yet*.

As the collected data from lower secondary schools shows, the mistakes connected with functions of SPPT and its distinction from other, similar grammatical tenses caused the learners the most significant problems. In contrast to lower secondary school learners, who struggled with the proper perception of SPPT and PST, at upper secondary schools the newly introduced Present Perfect Continuous Tense caused additional mistakes. Getting mixed up when using the time expressions *for* and *since*, the auxiliary verb *have* and *has*, problems to remember irregular forms of the verbs were not so frequent at this stage.

Table 6

Frequency of learners' mistakes in Simple Present Perfect Tense at various levels of school education

<u>Order</u>	<u>Lower secondary school learners</u>	<u>Upper secondary school learners</u>
1	forms of irregular verbs	undistinguishing Present Perfect from Past Simple
2	omission of auxiliary verbs	mixing up use of Present Perfect and Past Simple
3	undistinguishing Present Perfect from Present Simple	improper/confused use of <i>for</i> and <i>since</i>

4	disuse of <i>has/have</i> or if used the verb in past simple form instead of past participle	forms of irregular verbs (minor problems)
5	word order - wrong placement of adverbs <i>recently, for, since, never, ever, just, already</i> and <i>yet</i>	undistinguishing Present Perfect from Present Perfect Continuous
6		mixing up use of <i>has</i> and <i>have</i>
7		improper/confused use of <i>already</i> and <i>yet</i> in questions

To sum up, the mistakes made by the learners in the three grammatical tenses the research was focused on, can be grouped into the following five areas: omission or adding of an element, use of auxiliaries, improper word order use, contextual function of the tenses and the ability to distinguish between two seemingly identical tenses.

3.3 Causes of mistakes and possibilities for their elimination

Having carried out a detailed analysis of the mistakes, their possible causes and elimination were discussed. Based on the research findings (see Table 7), the following potential causes of the mistakes made in PST are, in some cases, influenced by social media which deliberately do not always respect grammatical norms and they use a lot of slang expressions. In the teachers' view, more written practice as well as explanations given by brighter classmates are needed. However, according to the learners, teacher's re-explanation of the structure and its use would be more beneficial.

As indicated in the Introduction, the PCT carries a range of meanings, but in school practice they are usually ignored with just one being emphasized - "actions taking place now" which leads to undesirable simplification of PCT usage in context. The suggestions which could possibly eliminate the problem included: the use of discovery techniques promoting learners' critical thinking; more frequent use of communicative activities in oral form and focus on the tense functions in its use.

Furthermore, the other reasons for mistakes in the use of the SPPT were caused by teachers themselves who tend to explain the tense in Slovak (teachers should compare it with either Past Simple or Present Perfect Continuous Tense) and very possibly by the absence of the tense in the Slovak morphological system. Beside this, a high dominance of form-based exercises over communicative activities was demonstrated. As a way of eliminating mistakes, the use of real life situations introduced into the teaching process through activities such as role play, didactic games, problem solving activities, simulations, and drama activities should be used, though their use obviously depends on the teacher's level of creativity and involvement.

Table 7

<i>Causes of mistakes and possibilities for their elimination</i>					
<i>Present Simple Tense</i>		<i>Present Continuous Tense</i>		<i>Simple Present Perfect Tense</i>	
<i><u>Causes of mistakes</u></i>	<i><u>Elimination of mistakes</u></i>	<i><u>Causes of mistakes</u></i>	<i><u>Elimination of mistakes</u></i>	<i><u>Causes of mistakes</u></i>	<i><u>Elimination of mistakes</u></i>
listening to slang, watching movies; influence of social media	more practice, mostly in written form (teachers); explanations by bright learners (teachers); re-explanation of the structure and its use (learners)	very general and simplified explanation of the structure and its use	use of discovery techniques and techniques fostering learners' critical thinking; more frequent use of oral communicative tasks; focus on the tense functions in its use	inappropriate explanation (often in L1); dominance of tasks oriented to practice of form over communicative alternatives; absence of the tense in L1	more frequent use of communicative and real-life - situation oriented tasks; use of self-reflection

4 Discussion

The research findings clearly show teachers' prevalent use of traditional activities and tasks for practising grammar structures rather than activities enabling critical, logical and creative thinking. The research sample of learners was mostly used to an unchanged model of teaching without opportunities for analysing, applying or evaluating their knowledge, thus creating undesirable routine for them.

The findings in the present study bear some similarity to the research results presented in the study written by Gadušová and Hartánská (2002) who conducted their research almost twenty years ago (in the school year 1998/1999) at lower and upper secondary schools in the towns of Nové Zámky, Orechová Potôň, Dunajská Streda, Šurany, Topoľčany and Čadca. The researchers also used two questionnaires – one for learners and one for teachers. The number of the research participants was 512 learners and 30 teachers. It is important to point out that the earlier research findings present rather a general view on grammar, i.e. the place of grammar in foreign language teaching and the problems the learners experienced then, without the specific focus of the current study. Therefore, only the research findings which in some way overlap with the present study are compared here.

The earlier research showed that the learners considered grammar a significant part of the lesson (more than three quarters of them), and almost three quarters of the learners claimed their teachers used an explicit, deductive approach to teaching grammar (74.4%) based on listening or reading a text (18.8%). In order to visualize knowledge of the grammar, teachers used blackboard (70.7% always and 19.7% sometimes).

In contrast, two thirds (66.7%) of the teachers were persuaded that dedicating any time to grammar in each lesson was unnecessary. Surprisingly, only 30.3% of them claimed they practised grammar deductively and half of them (50%) claimed they used an inductive approach. Their learners, on the other hand, considered that three quarters

(74%) of the teachers firstly introduced rules, and then examples were given. The blackboard as the traditional visual teaching aid was used by 86.7% of the teachers.

Concerning the language of presentation, teachers either used mother tongue exclusively (15%) or they combined it with the target language (60.5%). The data analysis of this research revealed that when explaining grammar in English (only 2.9%), the teachers also added a few words in the learner's mother tongue (21.1%).

The most frequent types of activity and task given to the learners were filling in gaps (62.5%), to create a grammatically correct form (33.2%), transformation exercises (17%), and translation (8.4%). Not even a quarter of the teachers used grammar games (23%) and role plays (21%). The percentage of the teachers relying on the exercises in the course books (usually with such instructions as *fill in*, *choose*, *underline the correct answer*) was 58.0% whereas teachers' own resources were used only by 21.1% of them. Unfortunately, communicative grammar games were almost never used.

The above listed types of activity and task supposedly resulted in the problems which the learners had. According to nearly half of the learners (44%), a correct usage of grammar and its differentiation from similar grammatical phenomena (24%) caused them significant problems. The form of a grammatical structure as such was not considered to be an obstacle to creating it (16%). The learners expressed their wish to use more real life and natural activities and tasks such as role plays (48.5%), conversational tasks (25.5%) and grammar games (24.5%) whereas translation associated with accuracy and analytical thinking was preferred only by a quarter of them (24%); (Gadušová & Hartánská, 2002, pp. 61-68).

At this point in the discussion, it is obvious that the research findings are identical in many respects to those in the current study, as the learners and teachers answered the same questions. Similarly, Lojová (2016) in her research conducted in the year 2000 emphasized declarative over procedural knowledge which consequently leads to mental blocks in communication in English. Interestingly enough, communication represented more problems for the learners than understanding of structural and functional characteristics of the language together with the distinctions between similar grammatical phenomena.

Another, similar research study was conducted by Hlava (2012) twelve years later which did not bring any noticeable improvements in the investigated field, either. From the learner's point of view, the verbalization of declarative knowledge and its irrelevance was conveyed; more learners strongly advocated changes in their English lessons which would lead to natural and communicative activities. Considering communication in English, the teachers who were questioned asserted that the learners were able to communicate exclusively using just simple structures (i.e. not *more complicated* ones).

To summarise, lack of communicative activities and tasks was, and still is, the cause of the afore mentioned problems. What remains bewildering is that despite the fact teachers are aware of this they still use mainly traditional approaches to teaching grammar. Rounding out the picture, the overuse of grammar manipulation exercises is recognised by the learners as well, but in contrast to their teachers, they cannot either influence or change the teaching situation in their English classes.

5 Conclusion

Grammar is a complex web which requires constant, meaningful, purposeful, productive practice and methodological guidance, because in formal foreign language school education control over its use is not automatically acquired. To be developed, grammar must be properly taught. The aim of this research paper has been to compare three grammatical tenses – Present Simple, Present Continuous, and Simple Present Perfect Tense in terms of how they are taught, mistakes made by learners, causes of mistakes, and possibilities for their elimination. The basic research findings are summarised in tables with commentaries. This, and other studies conducted in the past point conclusively to a lack of communicative, more challenging and real-life activities and tasks which would be welcomed by learners to break up less desirable daily patterns of instruction.

Nowadays, even though there is a strong emphasis on learner-centred teaching, the dilemma surrounding how to maintain balance between teacher and learner centeredness remains alive. Whatever the learner-centred approach might be in theory, in the classroom, the teacher typically still has the final word. If learning achievements are to be effective, teaching must be thoroughly planned, and based on properly chosen and designed activities which combine a balanced proportion of mechanical, semi-guided and communicative activities and tasks. These activities must be primarily based on teacher's refined verbal skills provoking interaction between him/her and the learner, and among learners themselves. To sum up, the presented research data enable to highlight the necessity of teacher's thoughtful and appropriate approach also in this aspect of English language instruction. The teacher should prepare grammar activities based on real-life situation-oriented tasks in which the learners will use complex and contextualised grammatical patterns more naturally. Without appropriate teaching and management, the education process may well become increasingly chaotic.

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Appendix - List of schools involved in the research

Present Simple Tense:

Gymnázium Juraja Fándlyho, Školská 3, Šaľa;
Stredná odborná škola, Štúrova 74, Šaľa;
Stredná škola s vyučovacím jazykom maďarským, Školská 485, Diakovce;
Základná škola s vyučovacím jazykom maďarským, Školská 485, Diakovce.

Present Continuous Tense

Gymnázium Antona Bernoláka, Námestovo;
Stredná odborná škola technická, Námestovo;
Spojená škola, Stredná odborná škola technická,
Stredná umelecká škola, Nižná;
Pedagogická a sociálna akadémia, Turčianske Teplice;
Základná škola s materskou školou, Oravská Lesná 299.

Present Perfect Tense

Gymnázium sv. Cyrila a Metoda, Farská 19, Nitra;
Gymnázium, Golianova 68, Nitra;
Gymnázium sv. Jozefa Kalazanského, Piaristická 6, Nitra;
Gymnázium, Párovská 1, Nitra;
Spojená škola, Slančíkovej 2, Nitra;
Základná škola, Beethovenova 11, Nitra;
Základná škola, Benkova 34, Nitra;
Základná škola kráľa Svätopluka, Dražovská 6, Nitra;
Základná škola Škultétyho 1, Nitra.