

GRAMMAR TEACHING IN EFL: A TEACHER'S PRACTICE IN FOCUS

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RESUMO: Neste artigo, discutiremos o ensino de gramática em língua estrangeira, considerando três fatores: primeiramente, seu equacionamento errôneo à discussão do ensino de língua materna. Em segundo lugar, a imprecisão da palavra gramática enquanto termo técnico e, finalmente, o papel das teorias externas em contraste com as teorias do próprio sistema de crenças do professor. Por fim, analisaremos amostras de um estudo de caso que conduzi em meu mestrado, a respeito das concepções de uma professora de língua estrangeira quanto ao ensino de gramática e as manifestações destas em sua prática.

ABSTRACT: In this article, I am going to discuss grammar teaching in a foreign language, taking three factors into account: firstly, its mistaken association to the discussion in mother tongue teaching; secondly, the inaccuracy of the word *grammar* as a technical term and, finally, the role of external theories as opposed to teachers' own belief systems. I go on to analyze samples of a case study I carried out during my master's course regarding a teacher's conceptions on grammar teaching and their manifestations in her practice.

1. Introduction

Grammar teaching has been one of the most hotly debated aspects of foreign language teaching. However, this discussion does not seem to make consequential contributions to improvements in the field, as one can notice when one reads forums on the subject either on the Internet, or in other media. More often than not, it seems as though advancements in applied linguistics has not gone beyond the constraints of academic enquiry in universities or in scientific articles. This trend may be explained by one of the following reasons: firstly, the discussion on grammar teaching in mother tongue is wrongly equated to the teaching of foreign languages; secondly, the concept of grammar itself is problematic; and, thirdly, scientific, theoretical contributions in the field are being taken as self-evident truths, without any need for critical reflection. Let's us now elaborate on each of these reasons.

2. Grammar in mother tongue teaching

The role of grammar in the teaching of mother tongue, in Portuguese, specifically, has been a thorny issue indeed. This trend may be ascribed to the linguistics turnaround, as of the 1960's, which contributed to a reassessment of the priorities in the teaching of Portuguese. It was common sense to accept that traditional Portuguese teaching overemphasized explicit grammar to the detriment of *communicative competence*. This has led many to assume, quite unproblematically, that studying grammar can be simply done away with. The question, however, remains highly problematic, as the "Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais" (henceforth PCNs) point out (Brasil, 1997, p. 39):

The teaching of Portuguese, as can be seen in habitual practice, tends to regard linguistic analysis as though it were an end in itself, not as a means of improving the quality of linguistic production. This is what happens, for example, to grammar, which has been taught in a decontextualized fashion, becoming simply a subject in which students must strive to do well on tests and get a pass grade. [...] because of that, it has been discussed whether grammar should be taught or not. *But this is a false question: the true question is why and how to teach it* (emphasis added).²

The main argument advanced in favor of the "exclusion" of grammar teaching in Portuguese is that too much focus was placed on the teaching of explicit grammar, while students did not develop satisfactory

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² The *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* are a set of documents proposed by the Ministry of Education with a view to improving the teaching of several disciplines, including foreign languages, based on the most recent developments in scientific research. The document was written in Portuguese. This version into English is my own.

reading or writing skills, for example. It might be true that, if focus is exclusively on grammar terminology, students' ability to use language meaningfully (or communicatively, if you like) will be at risk.

However, does that mean that we should not provide students with *any* explicit grammar teaching? Influential researchers have been wary of this fairly sweeping assumption. As the PCNs highlight, the problem may be one of focus, since it encourages teachers to find *a way of teaching grammar*, one which *adds* to the student's linguistic production, instead of simply *eliminating* it from the school syllabus. Along similar lines, Palmer (1984, p. 9) cogently argues that,

The central part of a language (its 'mechanics', its 'calculus' – other metaphors will do) is its grammar, and this should be of vital interest to any intelligent, educated person. If it has not been of such interest, then the fault must be in the way in which it has been presented, or in the failure to recognize its importance within this essentially human activity, language.

In this sense, grammar is worthy of investigation, as any other area of knowledge. Perini (1997) draws our attention to the fact that *grammar* can be a scientific discipline, with rigorous principles, but this is not widely known among the general public, to whom grammar is most widely associated with *normative* grammar. On a more pragmatic note, Crystal (2005), commenting on the death of languages, owing to the spread of English as a major *lingua franca*, warns that in order for us to avoid the smothering of large sums of "minor" languages, there needs to be an effort to employ linguists in the arduous task of systematizing languages which have never been written down, that is to say, of describing their grammar, and maybe producing a *pedagogical* grammar for educational purposes. How can we do justice to this end if we accept that descriptive grammar is not important, either for ourselves or for our students?

Most importantly still is the fact that many teachers have accepted that, since grammar knowledge may be an innate ability, there is no need for humans to reflect on the way languages work. This attitude subscribes to a view that, since we are "pre-programmed" to learn our mother tongue, its explicit study will be a waste of time. Crystal (1985) aptly challenges this view, when he ponders: if we never took an interest in optometry, since our eyes (like our language) are programmed to work well, how could eyeglasses be produced, or eye diseases treated? The problem may be that, in the case of languages, the application of theory may be less direct and clear.

In other words, what to teach a speaker of his native language, if he already *masters* it? We have to reckon the fact that this linguistic competence, which is fully developed by the age of 4, is what allows native language speakers to recognize (and produce, naturally) well-formed sentences. At this period, we are already able to produce a wide variety of complex, grammaticized language. An explanation is in order here: I have used the term *grammaticized* as proposed by Thornbury (2003), according to whom grammaticization is a process whereby learners establish a cohesive relationship between the lexis, or the words in a sentence.

Sometimes, communication may function perfectly well where there is enough context relying simply on the lexis, as the following situation shows: passengers on a train will be asked to show their tickets. The conductor will need to say only "Tickets!" (Instead of the fully grammaticized version "Would you mind showing me your tickets?", "Could you show me your tickets, please?") to establish the necessary communication. No one would misunderstand him. However, suppose you want to buy a medicine: it would not work if you picked up the phone and simply said to the person at the other end: "Cough tablets!". You would have to express yourself along the lines of: "I'd like some cough tablets. How much is it? Do you deliver?". By expanding the sentence, you have *added* grammar to vocabulary. Grammar then is a *device* to deal with lack of context (Thornbury, op. cit.).

However, communication is not only about forming cohesive, grammaticized sentences. Sometimes, "degrammared" language is more efficient than fully grammaticized language. Speakers will sometimes simply say: "Seen the film?", instead of the fully developed "Have you seen the film?", that is to say, sentences need to be appropriate in terms, for example, of the status involving the speakers, among other reasons (this is part of what constitutes the *communicative competence*).

So, coming back to the question we posed above, what to teach mother tongue students? Clearly there will be no need for teaching them to form grammatical sentences and, in this sense, it is not necessary to teach grammar (the *natural*, innate knowledge, obviously). However, there is another kind of grammatical knowledge that has to do with *adequacy*. We all know that the written language, for example, is so different from the spoken variety that it nearly constitutes a second language for native speakers! Another example could be formal, oral language, where one needs a command of what is considered the correct norm. Therefore, this is what students should learn in a native language class: to enhance their communicative

competence, since the natural grammar has already been unconsciously developed during the acquisition process.

Studying languages from a scientific point of view is quite a different subject. One may wish to understand how languages work from a mental perspective, in order to explain it, rather than only describing it. This is a valid, perfectly acceptable approach to language. If we go on to develop in our students a sense that studying grammar (either explanatory or descriptive) is not necessary, then how are we to expect to have linguists in the future? After these reflections, another question that comes to mind is: what to teach learners of a second/foreign language?

3. Grammar in second/foreign language teaching

The discussion of grammar teaching in mother tongue involves different elements from those involved in the learning of a second/foreign language. The most obvious aspect is the fact that, when native speakers go to school, they are already capable of *speaking* their languages. As we said above, their linguistic, grammatical competence has already been fully developed. From the moment they enter school, students look at their mother tongue in an explicit way, with a view to starting the literacy process. Assuming that the debate of grammar teaching in mother tongue is the same as in a second/foreign language might be an oversimplification.

To begin with, when second/foreign language students go to school, are they already capable of speaking the language *fluently*? Before moving on, a distinction has got to be made here: Second Language Acquisition Research didn't use to distinguish between second/foreign language learning (Cook, 2003). A second language would be *any* other language a learner is developing other than his own. For pedagogical considerations, however, it may be important to distinguish between those contexts where students leave classroom and still find opportunities for real interactions in English (say, in India), and those contexts where English has no widespread use, mainly in the oral variety, like in Brazil. Even though we may find a lot of English words and expressions in our language, we do not need to be *competent* in English to understand these samples of the English language. Actually, in some cases, we may even be unaware that a certain word we use is a foreign word (this is how we Brazilians possibly see words such as *jeans* or *drink*). In other words, English is not widely used in the ordinary situations where we use Portuguese for *real* interactions. This is an important difference: *second* language learners, in the strict sense of the term, like mother tongue speakers, may go to English classrooms with a fairly good command of the oral language.

A second, very important difference is the motivation factor. When we are learning our own language, this is an important, vital step in our future development. Learning it is as essential as learning how to walk, as it were, and the process is totally unconscious. There is no pressure to learn our mother tongue for professional purposes, for example. The need is simply there and, unless there is a mental or physical disorder, any person will eventually speak their mother tongue. Regarding a foreign/second language, however, we have different situation: the learner can give up the learning process and ignore all the arguable importance the language may have in his future life, after all, for the essential purpose of communication, the learner already masters his mother tongue, he can conceptualize the world he lives in, and this may be *all* that counts. As a second language learner, the pressure to conform to the society and learn the language may be as essential. If one decides to move to another country, if he wants to be successful, learning the language will be an essential first step towards the final proficiency. However, this may not be the case if the opportunities for real language use are very limited.

Let us then reflect on the context of Brazilian classrooms: even at the risk of being an oversimplification, I'd dare say Brazilian learners generally look for foreign language courses when they have already learned their native language (both in oral and in the written mode), in other words, after the literacy process has already started. Moreover, by this time, the Portuguese language has already been established as the speaker's main language. This is different, for example, when a 3 year-old child move to another country and develop both his native and second language. It seems as though there is more plasticity in the brain, because both languages are developing at the same time.

So, when Brazilian language learners go to classrooms, they have contact with English in the written mode, using the mother tongue as frame to help understanding how the foreign language works. This is a very important point to consider: mother tongue learners do not have to worry about how their language is represented in the written variety. This will only take place when we have already mastered our grammatical competence. Nor do we have another language that will interfere in the process, producing a form of *interlanguage*.

Other differences have to be taken into account: when we're learning our mother tongue, in the familial atmosphere, there is no need for any planning: the language simply evolves in the learner's mind by exposure and interaction and the optimal proficiency simply comes out at the right time. In a foreign language class, the learning process is organized in terms of activities graded for difficulty. Verb tenses, for example, are presented in an ordered way. This doesn't seem to remind us of the real nature of mother tongue learning, which is neither linear nor graded. By the way, what verb tense did we learn first?

To sum up, when we look closer at the distinction between learning a language as a mother or second/foreign language, we have to be wary of the debatable similarity some exaggeratedly attribute to both process. In special, we have to remember that children and adults may not learn in the same ways and that classroom learning is graded and resorts to abstraction, while natural language learning is multifarious and dynamic, relying more on experience rather than abstraction. Only then can we try to look at the *similarities* more in-depth.

4. A case study: a teacher's practice in focus

In a research I carry out during my master's course, I set out to look into a teacher's practice in order to analyze the participant-teacher's discourse and her actual practice. The research methodology was the ethnographic, qualitative and interpretative paradigm, according to which the data were collected and analyzed³.

It is a very difficult task to compare theory and practice, because theoretical conceptions may not manifest in clear ways in our practice, or this practice may stem from many variables that are not immediately observable. This being so, I'd like to point out that the results and conclusions presented here are tentative analyses. Furthermore, I do not seek to evaluate the teacher's performance in terms of good or bad practice, nor do I want to make suggestions as to what should be done. Naturally, I am not neutral, and if my analyses might sound biased at first appear, one has to recognize that these results and conclusions only constitute my own views, and they are naturally open to criticism.

4.1. The participant-teacher's conceptions of grammar

The word *grammar* is a multifarious term, and sometimes this polysemy contributes to making the discussion about grammar teaching a difficult one. I decided to analyze the participant-teacher's conceptions of grammar in order to try to understand her practice. It is noteworthy to point out that I do not defend the idea that we need a single definition of grammar in order to teach a language. As with the term *grammar*, the term *language* has proven to be a complex one in Linguistics, and many of the definitions given are simply incomplete. However, teachers have dealt with languages for quite a long time, because we might have a fairly sophisticated view of language, even if it is only an unconscious one, developed because of our experience as language speakers. Therefore, when I talk about the participant-teacher's grammar conceptions, I do not want to suggest that these are either correct/incorrect or good/bad. I tried to analyze these conceptions by analyzing interview and classroom practice. The results can be summarized as follows:

4.1.1. grammar as a product

Grammar as a product is a view that we encounter in language coursebooks, grammar books or dictionaries, to name only a few. The language is manageable in terms of building blocks. It is separated out for analysis in chapters (present, past, present perfect, future perfect, passive, etc.). In this sense, *grammar* is a *thing*-word. It is palpable and visible. I'd dare say we all may adhere to this conception of grammar when teaching English as a foreign language: if I use *any* explicit concept of grammar in my classes (like *noun*, *adjective*, *pronoun*), I'm "applying" grammar. In other words, grammar here is seen as a discipline, as a subject or terminology. It is a thing we can "touch".

The participant-teacher seemed to manifest these conceptions when she talked, in an interview, about such things as: *the grammar she wants to teach*, *the grammar she taught in a certain lesson* (or in this interaction with her students): "*Students, let's see this grammar?*" When we think of grammar in these terms, we subscribe to a view that its learning is cumulative and linear, even if we do not accept this at first.

³ Thanks are due to my advisor, Célia Assunção Figueiredo, and the participant teacher. For more details on this study, refer to Rodrigues (2005)

4.1.2. Grammar as a process

When we try to understand grammar as a natural knowledge that is engineered in the speaker's mind (in the Chomskyan's sense), we are taking grammar as a *process* word. Grammar is then the relationship that exists between words, contributing to the meaning we want to express. Word order is grammar, for example. Grammar is simply there. There is no way not to teach it. As a process, grammar has to do with *grammaticization*, as we discussed above. All teachers naturally want their students to progress from highly constrained language to more cohesive expression: *You tell me where is supermaket* should develop into *Could you tell me where the supermarket is?*, or *No smoke here, please* should be rephrased as *Don't smoke here, please*. This is grammar in the widest sense, and it has to do with making ourselves clearly and adequately understood.

4.1.3. Grammar as norm

Sometimes, we may choose between one grammar form or another. Language speakers tend to feel doubtful whether to use *like* or *as*, *whether* or *if*, *we* or *us*, but this is an entirely different matter from the one discussed above. Whether we use *like* or *as*, for example, may be a matter of choice, but we cannot simply choose to inflect verbs after modals, for example: *She may studies*. There are rules are *external*, that is, they are subject to judgments from language users, while other rules are internal to the grammar, we have no control over them. It's not up to us to change word order when this is simply not possible. One of the most widely promulgated views of grammar is that of norm, because grammar studies started exactly with normative concerns, when grammarians tried to systematize the way writers and orators used the language in literature or religious prose.

The participant-teacher seemed to hold this view of grammar when she said, in the interview, that grammar has to do with social class, or that she would feel bad if her students did not express themselves *correctly*, because they might fall victim to discrimination.

4.2. The participant-teacher's teaching

One of the most fascinating facts about language teaching is that practice does not change automatically because of theoretical principles, or because of our theoretical (or pre-theoretical) conceptions. For example, one of the most noticeable characteristics of the participant-teacher's practice was that she was really worried to make sure her practice did not follow traditional teaching. The teacher seemed to show that she was acquainted with theoretical advancements on communicative language teaching and, as a result, she had supposedly moved away from traditional methods.

However, I could notice that she approached grammar teaching in a basically PPP (presentation, practice, production) model, one which lends grammar teaching a fairly overt treatment, and one which an orthodox view of communicative teaching would probably reject. The participant teacher overemphasized grammar, although she claimed not to do so. A count of the number of explicit terms she used in classroom is relevant, including fairly sophisticated concepts, such as the following: sentence, verb complement, adverbial phrase, pronoun object, conjunction, clause, future preterit, imperfect preterit, compound imperfect preterit, subject, subordinate clauses, and the like. One of her main procedures in introducing grammar structures was by trying to elicit explicit grammatical knowledge from the students, as this excerpt from one of her classes shows:

Classroom scene – Context: the teacher is introducing a grammar lesson.

Teacher: *Students, let's see... so, reported speech is when we report what somebody else has said. In the intermediate (level) we saw that... do you remember the episode of Friends?, when we reported what other people said? Let's review the rules, the basic rules. "When you put direct speech into reported speech, you usually change...(reading from the book)" what? Do you remember? The tense of the verb, right? So, erm... what? I...*

Valeria: *The tense back shifted.*

Teacher: *We changed the tense, right? Let's suppose that old examination, "I missed last class", let's suppose she said this sentence on Tuesday, and we are going to report today, "She said that she had missed last class", right? We have to back shift, "She said that she..."?*

Students: (silence)

The centrality of explicit grammar in the participant-teacher practice can also be noticed in this classroom scene (Context: the teacher is correcting an exercise):

Student1: *Teacher, I didn't understand, what verb is this?*

Teacher: *This verb is in the past, isn't it?*

Student1: *Yes, but...*

Teacher: *Normal...*

Student 1: *had had?* (emphatic)

Teacher: *It's because the first is in the past and the other is a participle, right?*

Student2: *The auxi-* (interruption)

Teacher: (interrupting) *That's right, the auxiliary verb and the main verb, so...*

As we can see, S1 found the *had had* construction strange, and he may have thought that the verb was “repeated”. He clearly wanted to understand the construction *meaning*, but the teacher only gave him grammatical information about the *had had* occurrence (*it's because the first is in the past and the other is a participle, right?*; *That's right, the auxiliary verb and the main verb, so...*).

For a number of reasons, which may go unnoticed, we may perform differently from what we preach to do. There isn't any judgmental sense in my saying so, as this can happen to *any* teacher. However, we clearly need to be able to observe our practice from a distance, in order to understand its overall significance and how it impacts our teaching. Contradictions between our discourse and our practice will clearly hint at the need for a reassessment of our teaching procedures.

As for the master's thesis theme, I chose grammar in this study because it is fraught with controversies in the language teaching field. As Ellis (1994, apud BORG, 1999: 157) notes,

(...) In ELT, grammar teaching clearly constitutes such an ill-defined domain: the role of formal instruction itself has been a perennial area of debate, and more than 20 years of research have failed to yield firm guidelines for grammar teaching methodology. The study of how teachers make sense of the many uncertainties that surround grammar teaching is thus fruitful terrain for examining the nature of teachers' theories in ELT.

Controversies naturally feed the development of the area in an unstoppable way. They are more than welcome in this post-modern period applied linguistics is going through. However, if applied linguistics is not to indulge in simplistic ideas, nor in dogmatism, we have to take into account what Cook (2003: 35) observes, regarding the unproblematic extrapolation of Second Language Acquisition Research to classroom teaching contexts:

In many ways, the natural approach is an object lesson in what applied linguistics should not be. For it sought to impose upon teachers, without consultation and without consideration for their existing practices and beliefs, ideas based upon academic research and theorizing. Its view of SLA, moreover, was derived directly from mainstream linguistics research into child first language acquisition (...) This research was then assumed to be directly relevant – indeed imperative – to changes in the way languages were taught.

However, care has also to be taken as to the emerging tendency, on the part of teachers, of being skeptical about scientific contributions to language teaching. There needs to be a careful balance between practice and theory, otherwise one more undesirable dichotomy will emerge in applied linguistics and language teaching: which is better, external theories or teacher's practice?

5. REFERENCES

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