Process-oriented grammar approaches during content teaching: implications for English language teachers

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Abstract

In the past, language lessons used to focus on form; with the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, grammar teaching perspectives suffered substantial changes, particularly during English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) lessons. Former prescriptive methodologies that were isolated from context gave way to process-oriented approaches where grammar is studied by focusing on meaning. In order to understand what the teaching of grammar involves in today's lessons, and what changes it has gone through, we analyse and contrast different

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conceptualizations of grammar with the aim of understanding their implications in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). The article highlights the importance of teaching both grammar and content simultaneously, with approaches such as Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), for students to acquire the target language in a more effective way.

Keywords**:** English Language Teaching, EFL/ESL, Content and Language Integrated Learning, grammar, process-oriented grammar.

Resumen

En el pasado, durante la enseñanza de lenguas se hacía foco en la forma; con el advenimiento del enfoque Comunicativo de enseñanza de una lengua, la manera de enseñar la gramática sufrió cambios sustanciales, en particular en las clases de inglés como Lengua Segunda o Extranjera. Las metodologías basadas en normas prescriptivas y aisladas de contexto dieron lugar a enfoques donde la gramática se enseña como parte de un proceso de adquisición en el que se hace foco en el análisis del significado. Para comprender lo que involucra la enseñanza de gramática en la actualidad, y los cambios que se han dado históricamente en la enseñanza de esta, fueron analizadas y contrastadas diferentes conceptualizaciones procurando dar lugar a lo que estas implican en el área de enseñanza de inglés. El artículo resalta la importancia de trabajar con ambos, gramática y contenido en simultáneo, con enfoques como el de Enseñanza Integrada de Contenido y Lengua, para que los estudiantes puedan adquirir la lengua meta de manera más efectiva.

Palabras clave**:** enseñanza de inglés, enseñanza de inglés como lengua segunda y extranjera, enseñanza integrada de contenido y lengua, gramática, gramática orientada hacia el proceso.

Introduction

Languages are constantly changing, and different schools of grammar have analysed the way in which languages are used and developed throughout time. There are five main schools of English Grammar: Traditional Prescriptive Grammar, Modern

Descriptive Grammar, Structuralist Applied Grammar, Chomskyan Generative Grammar, and Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar. These schools present diverse perspectives which have influenced Pedagogic Grammar in different ways affecting language teaching approaches. At present, contextualized approaches to grammar teaching, such as *"Grammaring"* (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) are being adopted (Thornbury, 2001); the implications of adopting differing perspectives of grammar during English language teaching will be analysed trying to give light to relevant contemporary approaches.

Language allows human beings to communicate with each other; to transmit specific ideas by producing clear messages. The degree of detail, the precision in the transmission of ideas one can reach to with language, is possible because of the existence of grammar. Language users who are grammatically accurate can express their ideas more effectively that those who lack grammatical knowledge; therefore, it is important for language users to learn and become conscious of different grammatical issues if they want to transmit precise and intelligible messages. But what is this thing called grammar that allows us such accuracy in language? And should we continue teaching grammar during ESL/EFL lessons although we are being told to teach content?

Regarding the former question, while Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 2) state that "grammar is concerned with how sentences and utterances are formed", Thornbury (1999, p. 1) adds that "all language in use can be analysed at each of these four levels: text, sentence, word and sound (...) [and that] the study of grammar consists, in part, of looking at the way these forms are arranged and patterned." Different researchers (Cullen, 2008; Ellis, 2006; McCarthy, 1991; Yule, 1998) seem to agree that although grammar studies start at the sentence level - studying the structure of sentences (syntax) and the way words are formed (morphological aspects) - micro and macro levels beyond and within sentences must also be considered. Contemporary grammar studies include lexical, phonological, and syntagmatic and paradigmatic aspects from the discourse analysis field.

This complex view of grammar seems associated to an increasing interest in the study of meaning. As Thornbury (1999, p. 4) highlights, "grammar is a tool for making meaning"; speakers and writers use grammar to convey meaning in precise ways. Although words may convey meaning themselves, it is generally necessary to move beyond the lexical level to transmit complex ideas in accurate ways. In this sense, textual and contextual information is required to provide a framework that allows

receivers to interpret information. Both form (grammatical structures) and function (the intended effect of the text on the receiver) are necessary to convey meaning. Accordingly, Yule (1998, p. xiv) states that "grammar is viewed as a set of constructions in which differences in form can be explained in terms of differences in conceptual meaning or interpretation in context".

As conceptualizations show, defining grammar is complex. Hence, bordering a conception by defining what grammar is not - through Yule's (1998, p. 3) notion of "being ungrammatical" - may help define the term's scope. According to Yule (1998) when someone uses forms and syntactic structures in abnormal ways and in unacknowledged contexts, one is "being ungrammatical". In this sense, Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 3) state that: "I my sister gave a sweater for birthday her" is an unacceptable form. Languages are dynamic and undergo constant changes; nevertheless, languages can be studied and grammatical categories such as tense, verbs, adverbials, aspect, subject, object and modality, follow certain patterns that can be defined. We can state that English has a SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) structure, and we can define when changes in this structure happen (during question making for example). Understanding grammar is essential, not only to understand language features, it also helps understand language's "representational and interpersonal functions" (Thornbury, 1999, p. 1): the way in which one represents the surrounding world, and the way in which grammar is used during the interaction with other people. Therefore, it is important to teach both content and grammar simultaneously, for example through a Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (CLIL).

Researchers in the ESL/EFL fields state that both grammar and content should be taught in an intertwined way to provide contextual support, make learning relevant, and for students to become more conscious about the way in which the language works (and hence, become accurate independent users). According to Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols (2012), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) implies the teaching of an additional language by focusing on both language and content. It is the preferred option in schools that apply a bilingual immersion programme as students learn the target language in a natural way when the approach is applied effectively (Soler, González-Davies and Iñesta, 2016). Therefore, as the approach states, language teachers must still plan and teach how to deal with different grammatical aspects during content lessons. However, this does not mean teaching grammar as it was taught years ago. A tension between grammar and content should exist and new grammar perspectives focused on

the learning process should be incorporated to make the learning meaningful and enjoyable.

Prescriptive, descriptive, and pedagogic approaches to grammar

Grammar can be approached from two opposite perspectives: one that perceives grammar as a set of rules and principles that must guide language use; and another that understands grammar as something that explains language in use. The former refers to prescriptive grammar and the latter to descriptive grammar.

Prescriptive grammars establish a set of rules that are expected to guide language use. They detail rules which would enable certain specific language production; "prescriptions as to what should be said" *(*Thornbury, 1999, p. 11). According to Bourke (2005) these kinds of grammars are dogmatic and ignore actual language uses. In the past, language teachers relied on prescriptive grammar approaches as grammar rules had to be closely followed by language learners; behavioristic approaches that relied on drilling and memorisation reigned then (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Contemporary linguists as Canale (2010) y Barrios (2006) mention that prescriptive views tend to be purist and simplistic as they try to establish rigid language rules that should be perceived as "correct" in opposition to "improper" language uses which deviate from prescribed standards. Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 6), state that "prescriptive rules are often social rules that are believed to mark out a speaker or writer as educated or as belonging to a particular social class."

New approaches, on the other hand, follow descriptive grammars that are based on authentic language production; on how people use written or spoken grammar in varied ways, frequently deviating language norms. This perspective could not exist in the past as it was quite impossible to gather data regarding actual language use in different contexts. According to Leech (2000, p. 678) the first computer corpora of English was created in 1961 (Brown Corpus), and only included written samples of language use. At present, plenty of data is being collected in different online corpora such as Webcorp or the Cambridge International Corpus (CIC); and new descriptive grammars are based on corpus analysis. In this sense, Leech (2000), details how grammars based on corpus-oriented research provide evidence of changes in language uses; and Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 6) state in their Cambridge Grammar of

English that "the main approach taken in [their] book is descriptive. [As] the emphasis throughout the book is on describing the ways in which speakers and writers of English use the language to communicate with one another."

A third approach to grammar is a pedagogic one; an approach that acknowledges tendencies in the different schools of grammar, relies on a descriptive approach, and incorporates grammar for language learning purposes. As Bygate, Tonkyn and Williams (1994) highlight, in the past, language teaching and prescriptive grammar approaches were associated. With the exception of theory-oriented approaches such as the Functional Grammar approach (Halliday, 1985) which focuses on meaning, and the Generative Grammar approach (Chomsky, 1965) which focuses mainly on how grammar is structured in the brain - approaches to SLA such as the Grammar translation, the Audiolingual method, or the Practice-Presentation-Production (PPP) approach, heavily relied on prescriptive grammar (Lightbrown, 2006; Thornbury, 1999). As descriptive grammar approaches and aspects from different grammar schools - such as the importance of functions (Halliday, 1985) - substituted prospective views, new pedagogies of grammar teaching appeared. In this sense, Thornbury (1999) states that a third category of grammar rules exists: the pedagogic rules (which include rules of form and rules of use). For pedagogic purposes, descriptive rules may be simplified bearing in mind learner's needs and context. These are "rules that make sense to learners while at the same time providing them with the means and confidence to generate language with a reasonable chance of success." (Thornbury, 1999, p. 12). As Bourke (2005) states, when teaching grammar, unfamiliar metalanguage should be avoided and grammar should be presented in simple, useful, truthful and meaningful ways.

Although certain tendencies against teaching grammar in the ESL/EFL field exist - such as Krashen´s (1982) Zero grammar approach - it is an intrinsic part of language and therefore of language learning. "Linguistic competence" implies grammar knowledge (Thornbury, 1997) and there is ample evidence supporting its teaching as its knowledge enables language proficiency and prevents language "fossilization" (Long, 1988; Norris and Ortega, 2000 in Ellis 2006, p. 97). Due to this - and to the proved fact that when teachers know about grammar pedagogy, the better teaching choices they make (Borg, 1999b; Thornbury, 1997; Wright & Bolitho, 1993) - research in the Pedagogic Grammar field is developing by analysing perspectives within the broader ESL/EFL language teaching area.

Grammar as product and grammar as process

There are two main conceptualisations of grammar in the pedagogic field: as a product or as process. Each perspective implies different ways of teaching and conceiving the target language.

In the past, as a prescriptive approach to grammar prevailed it was conceived as a product; that is to say, as a finished object with an unchangeable system of rules. Grammarians and linguists had still not presented other options. Then, new approaches such as the Descriptive, Generative or Functional presented variation and highlighted new complexities and possibilities of grammar studies giving place to a more complex approach. Nevertheless, many books still present grammar from a reified perspective; with rules to be memorised and followed repeatedly.

Grammar as a process, on the other hand, is related to descriptive approaches as it implies reflection of actual language usage for students to become aware of which forms are used to transmit certain meaning. Bourke (2005, p. 91) states that consciousness of how language works can be built through a "process-oriented approach as opposed to the conventional product-oriented approach" and highlights the importance of guided discovery, where students can inductively become aware of forms.

Teaching grammar and content

Knowing about grammar and understanding what different concepts of grammar imply is crucial for language teachers; as Thornbury (1997, p. 138) states: "some understanding of linguistic systems is useful in terms of informing choices about the rules to be taught and the tasks to be set". Research in the pedagogic grammar field stresses the importance of teaching in contextualised ways while promoting student discovery and aware-raising activities focused on meaning (Carter, 2006). What is more, studies suggest approaches which try to highlight the lack of grammar students may experience during certain moments by inviting them to "notice the gap" (Schmidt, 1990 in Ellis, 1993, p. 97), so that - at times - teachers may provide personal, on the spot, corrective feedback which will foster student's language acquisition (Van Beuningan, De Jong & Kuiken, 2012).

Apart from this, the implementation of corpora during lessons may allow students not only to study non-standard authentic language productions, it may also lead them to reflect about the degree of intelligibility those productions permit. It may enable them to visualise how subtle language variations may affect understanding and to perceive differences between spoken and written grammar (something which was impossible in the past as books only included written forms) (Bruton, 2009; Ellis, 2006; McCarthy, 1998; Thornbury, 1999).

Language researchers analyse ways of improving linguistic competence during ESL/EFL lessons (Borg, 1999a; Celse-Murcia, 1999; Ellis, 2006; Harmer, 2001; Long, 1988). Contemporary studies suggest a "*grammaring*" process (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) based on a communicative approach as it allows contextualisation of grammatical studies by establishing meaningful relationships between forms, functions and terms within authentic texts. Larsen-Freeman (2014, p. 264) defines *grammaring* as "the ability to use grammar constructions accurately, meaningful, and appropriately." This approach conceives the teaching of grammar as a process where students steadily become conscious about grammar structures and further their linguistic competence. Grammar is conceived "as a skill to be mastered, rather than a set of rules to be memorized" (Larsen Freeman, 2001, p. 255). Instead of focusing on grammatical aspects in isolation, teachers and students engage on a student-centred process where they work with the grammar that emerges from the texts that are being used. They discuss the use of specific forms within certain context to transmit a particular meaning. Hence, this perspective may be incorporated into the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach as it allows to establish relevant connections between the content under study and the grammar of the language being used.

Nowadays, most language researchers agree on: i) the multifaceted nature of grammar and grammar teaching; ii) the importance of including aspects beyond and within sentence level when defining grammar, for example by analysing relevant content. Therefore, approaches to language teaching which focus on a content area may not only foster the development of the four macro-skills of language (reading, listening, writing and speaking) and of specific lexis, it also provides ample opportunities to analyse the grammar that emerges from the context. To foster *grammaring*, instead of presenting specific forms in isolation, teachers develop tasks which students have to accomplish by reflecting about the grammar that is being used. For example, students may have to identify and reflect about the use of the present perfect tense by analysing

the tenses that are present in a text about renewable sources of energy or the importance of protecting biodiversity. Or they may have to identify the adverbs of time in a text that details the cycle of life of a bumblebee to use them to write a short description about the topic.

In this way, during these type of approaches students are scaffolded (Díaz Maggioli, 2012; Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976) through the process of understanding and incorporating grammar structures while learning about other matters.

Conclusion

In the past, English as a second or foreign language was taught by focusing on prescriptive views of grammar, corpus data was hard to gather, and grammars were conceived dogmatically as finished objects. A puritan view of grammar reigned and language productions that did not follow the strict prescriptive rules that grammars established were conceived as wrong. As languages are in constant change (proven by corpus data), and as different schools of grammar have appeared conceiving grammar in different ways, notions of grammar and approaches to grammar teaching have changed. A more complex and realistic conception of grammar, that allows variation and deviation from rule, has gained place. Modern grammars are descriptive and rely on constant updates based on existing corpus studies. These changes have affected the way in which grammar is approached and taught. Nowadays, the meaning-making role of grammar is considered fundamental as more attention is given to functions outlined by grammatical forms, as grammar analysis becomes more and more contextualized (studied within a specific content area), and as aspects below and above sentence level are considered (for example: phonology and discourse analysis). All these changes have affected the Pedagogical grammar field greatly giving place to new teaching trends focused on the analyses of language in meaningful and contextualised ways. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to language teaching has proven to be highly effective as students acquire the target language in meaningful ways. Nevertheless, students' accuracy may be enhanced by incorporating the study of grammar as a process during parts of the lessons by focusing not only on the content under study but also on the grammar of the content being presented.

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