The collaborative construction of grammar concepts at secondary school
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In this study we explore the construction of grammar concepts by secondary students. The pupils deal with conflictive grammar questions related to the pronoun system and they do so in a collaborative setting and following a lexical and pragmatic-semantic-formal approach to basic grammar phenomena (subject, verb, accusative, argument…). Our research question is: How do pupils build their grammar knowledge within a collaborative setting which integrates pragmatics, semantics and form?

This study is inspired by research carried on in Canada, France and Spain in the last decade exploring the construction of the students’ grammar concepts. It points out that grammar knowledge is a mixture of different levels (intuition, form, place, meaning, memorized paradigm, enunciation…) and that students find it difficult to separate language and reality, to integrate pragmatics, semantics and form, to overcome a simple and linear perspective on the sentence, or to integrate declarative and procedural knowledge. These obstacles are conceived of as a consequence of a transmissive instructional mode focused on formal descriptions of grammar phenomena. A new research emerges from this previous research based on the following issues: (i) to design and implement a new model of grammar teaching based on collaborative inquiry and a wider perspective on grammar, and (ii) to explore the argumentative discourse held by students under this model.

The oral data that we analyze come from the students’ interaction in small groups in a natural classroom setting. In order to describe and interpret the interaction carried on we have designed an instrument that approaches the discourse flow from two complementary perspectives: metalinguistic content and argumentative interaction. The first one results from all those metalinguistic expressions used in order to reason about grammar problems, identified by the metalinguistic statement unit, ranging from pragmatics to semantics and form. The second one refers to the different ways in which argumentation is linguistically shaped, identified by the argumentative episode unit, which can be additive (explaining: to bring a reason, expanding: to enlarge a perspective, adding: to repeat, accepting: to approve an idea, and concluding: to end up an argumentation) or reactive (diverging: to change the focus, contradicting: to show total disagreement, clarifying: to show partial disagreement, and challenge: to underline a contradictory item). Combining these two approaches to the students’ discourse we can approach the reflective process that is going on concerning both the collaborative construction of grammar concepts and the discursive moves that contribute to it.

We contrast an initial and a final dialogue in one of the sample groups. In the initial dialogue the group is stuck in a disputative talk where grammar notions appear to be
rigid and intuitive, although pertinent regarding the content of the activity. In the final dialogue, after having worked within this model for a month and a half, the group is well able to develop an exploratory talk and metalinguistic notions are focused from different perspectives. We observe that, in the latter dialogue, argumentative interaction is richer and so is the metalinguistic notions repertoire. From this we consider that there is a straight link between argumentation and metalinguistic content.

School objectives in linguistic education apply to a communicative use of language on behalf of the future citizens in a society with high literacy demands. In achieving these communicative skills, however, grammar plays an important role, regarding (i) grammar notions, (ii) procedural aspects to apprehend these notions effectively, and (iii) positive attitudes towards the linguistic code as an interesting field to be studied. In this sense, we ought to explore altogether a model of a school grammar to be implemented in real classrooms, and a model of research procedures to explore the triggering processes of this implementation. This work is being carried on by secondary school teachers and researchers from the UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and the current work pretends to be a new contribution to it.

This submission links a practice-based research (our explored data come from a real classroom setting) and a research-based practice (activities are brought into the arena by secondary school teachers collaboratively with researchers). It overcomes a transmissive teaching/learning setting and places grammar education in a rich, meaningful and collaborative frame.