The dynamic construction of metalinguistic knowledge
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Research problem

First language traditional lessons invest a large amount of time on grammar with poor results. This seems to come from a strictly formal approach to the sentence (WHAT), transmissive methodologies (HOW) and a lack of a real purpose (WHY). Is it possible to explore new ways of grammar teaching? Our intention would be (a) to take a semantic approach to the sentence (WHAT), (b) to organize the class on a dialogic basis (HOW) and (c) to propose real grammar problems students should think about beyond grammar textbooks (WHY).

Research question

General research question: How metalinguistic knowledge is shared and built up by pupils in a teaching and learning situation that follows the former points (a), (b) & (c)?

Specific research question: Regarding the former point (a), how do pupils use the metalinguistic strategies to solve grammar problems in interaction?

Method

Sample:
- 12 dialogues taken from the interaction of 3 groups of secondary students (15-16 years old) while solving 3 type of activities

Design:
- the task students where involved in was organized in a Didactic Sequence (DS) of four stages: 1. introduction to the task (grammar contents & interaction rules), 2. task (with a support material), 3. final oral and written report, 4. pupils diaries. This Didactic Sequence took one and a half months (18 sessions of 1 hour each)

Materials:
- recorded and transcripted group dialogues
- pupils and teacher diaries

Procedure:
- the 3 groups where selected out of 7 groups according to the variables of [+academic level] and [±involvement in the activity]
• the teacher followed the action-research model according to which he kept taking notes on his diary to reflect on the development of the task regarding not only grammar aspects but the ground rules of the interaction as well
• in each session pupils used to have around 20 minutes to discuss the grammar problems presented in the sequence plan. The discussion was recorded and listened to by the teacher after each session. As it was a real in-class experience, the teacher would assess the groups as the task unfolded
• every day the groups would have an assessment sheet (a mark and a comment) on the recorded discussion

Analysis

The basic data come from the transcription of the recorded dialogues. On the present stage of our research we have established “metalinguistic statement” as the analysis unit (sometimes it remains within a turn and sometimes not). As a first step on our current study, we have isolated every metalinguistic statement on each dialogue. This has lead us to the “repertoire” that emerges from a specific dialogue when a group explores a grammar problem. This repertoire embraces pragmatic, semantic and formal resources and as the conversation unfolds pupils use these three kind of resources. The following graphic comes from the third activity (on the misuse of some pronouns in a text) and it belongs to a group with a high academic and involvement level.
Preliminary results

Related to the point (a) that stands on Research problem there have been both expected and unexpected outcomes:

(a) WHAT (semantic approach to the sentence)
   • Expected outcome:
     • pupils use the verb pragmatic and semantic profile to understand some syntactic problems
     • this tendency increases along the three activities
   • Unexpected outcome:
     • pupils do focus on the three kind of resources in a quite dynamic manner and not “one-at-a-time” as grammar lessons do
     • semantics do not vertebrate the exploratory talk
     • Interaction does not settle on a single resource to explore its potential (i.e. subject-verb agreement) but it rather takes the form of an exploratory talk that cannot achieve a high abstraction and explanatory level.

Provisional conclusion

A qualitative analysis of exploratory talk in grammar problem solving situations is possible when using an emic perspective. It leads us to see the complexity of this kind of interaction and thus the complexity of strategies pupils use in a group setting, some of which were expected and some other were not.

The next step should be to explore the link between the students’ metalinguistic and discursive activities/uses of language.

GREAL grammar project

GREAL (Grup de Recerca sobre Ensenyament i Aprenentatge de Llengües) is a group, directed by Dr. Anna Camps, formed by teachers from the Faculty of Education at UAB and Secondary Education language teachers.

During the last five years it has been developing a wide activity around the construction of the so-called “school grammar”, ranging from qualitative studies on pupils’ L1 metalinguistic concepts, to in-class intra and interlinguistic experiences in grammar teaching according to the model of Didactic Sequences (DS), or to quantitative cross-sectional studies on the evolution of metalinguistic knowledge.

Camps, A. et al. (2005) Bases per a l’ensenyament de la gramàtica, Barcelona: Graó