Grammar at secondary school: how students build grammar concepts in a collaborative setting

Xavier Fontich
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

EMPIRICAL paper

Grammar at secondary school: how students build grammar concepts in a collaborative setting

- Relevance to EARLI domain of Learning and Instruction

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, grammar plays an important role, according to studies conducted in the last decades in different countries like the UK or France. These studies propose to overcome the view on grammar as a peripheral scholar object and rather to look at it as a necessary content for L2 and written composition instruction, as well as a content that can be studied in its own momentarily apart from the dynamics of communication. 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.

- Significance for theory, policy and practice

This submission links a practice-based research and a research-based practice since activities are brought into the arena by secondary school teachers collaboratively with researchers. The results of this cooperative action have an influence on educational policy regarding the role of grammar in the official curricula and regarding in-service and pre-service teacher education. It overcomes a transmissive teaching/learning setting and places grammar education in a rich, meaningful and collaborative frame.

- Theoretical framework, conceptual rationale or pragmatic grounding

Our study is inspired by research carried on in Canada, France and Spain in the last decade that explores the construction of the students’ grammar concepts. It points out that students’ grammar knowledge tends to be 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 pupils’ interaction while working in small groups, and (ii) to explore the argumentative discourse held by students under this model.

- Research method and design
  - research questions

Our two research question are: (i) How do pupils build their grammar knowledge within a collaborative setting which integrates pragmatics, semantics and form?, and (ii) How can we elaborate an analysis model for exploring it?

- Context

Pupils in a language class in Barcelona-Spain deal with conflictive grammar questions related to the pronoun system in Catalan and Spanish. These questions arise from the inter and intralinguistic contrasts of data from two sources: automatic translators results and speakers’ sentences gathered by the students in a small research that they design. Students work in a collaborative setting and follow a lexical and pragmatic-semantic-formal approach to basic grammar phenomena (subject, verb, accusative, argument…).

- Participants

Participants are students in their last course of secondary school in Spain (15-16 years old).

- data sources

The oral data that we analyze come from the students’ interaction in small groups in a natural classroom setting at secondary school.

- sampling

We contrast an initial and a final dialogue in one of the sample groups, with medium academic level and low motivation.

The first task was “Look at the sentences you have just analyzed and choose the easiest and the most difficult one, explaining why you think they are so”. The final task asked the students to discuss a sentence where the argument and a pronoun referred to it appear altogether. Both were convergent tasks (with a unique final solution).

- procedure
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 underlie 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.

- Clarity of results or preliminary results and conclusions

As preliminary results of our analysis, we can see that 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.

Certainly pupils show a lack of metalinguistic repertoire concerning semantic dimension and that’s why they use formal notions instead of semantic ones. They also show a lack of argumentative repertoire. In the final dialogue, after having worked within this model for a month, the group is well able to develop an exploratory talk and metalinguistic notions are focused from the three different perspectives: semantic, pragmatic and formal. Pupils neither attain the final solution but they integrate a wide range of concepts. Coreference: students try to give sense to the pronoun in the text. Null subject: the students check if the pronoun could act as a subject and not as a locative. Complementary distribution: students try to transform the sentence and to introduce new words with the same value. Syntactic function: they try to observe under which conditions we can consider a word accusative, dative, locative or subject. We interpret exploratory talk as being at the same time cause and consequence of this larger repertoire of metalinguistic concepts: on the one hand, pupils use more concepts and they can talk about many more phenomena and link them to one another; on the other hand, a greater collaboration and a more versatile attitude enhances this integration of grammar knowledge.

We have argued that, in the initial dialogue, behind pupil’s references to accusative or dative there’s the semantic notion of argument and predicate, a content the pupils were meant to learn. Through a more collaborative interaction the group creates richer argumentative discourse and metalinguistic content becomes more ductile; at the same time, a higher degree on collaborative interaction is due to a better understanding of grammar as an organic union of pragmatic, semantic and form levels. We consider that there is a straight link between argumentation and metalinguistic content. Therefore we must promote this link as a necessary although not sufficient condition for grammar learning.