Nowadays the goals and implementation strategies in teaching grammar have been revisited and rebuilt along two working paths, specifically concerning secondary education. Firstly, the focus on teaching brings the need to address some specific items: (1) didactic transposition; (2) grammar metalanguage; (3) language use and linguistic system; (4) metalinguistic reflection; (5) role of the teacher; and (6) teaching and learning strategies implying manipulation and verbalization.

A second focus concerns exploring the student’s learning processes. In this paper we are going to bring our attention to this second focus. The main question is the following: in what way does a methodology of teaching and learning grammar implying exploratory talk reveal the students’ conceptualization processes? The teacher shall regulate the teaching and learning process and at the same time he must closely follow his own teaching practice and his students’ learning processes in grammar: he observes the way the students are talking during grammar activities to discover how they are learning, what sort of problems they face, what sort of discourse helps them going a step forward or backward. The student, on the other hand, is progressively acknowledging a metalanguage which helps her in her discourse about grammar and helps her learning.

When students facing a grammar problem talk among them in the whole class and in work groups, and also when they interact with the teacher, they are indirectly bringing to the arena some data that may reveal very useful to the teaching practice. Some scholars have addressed this issue (for example, Fisher [1996] concerning adjectives, Camps [2000b] and Camps et al. [2001] concerning pronouns, or Notario [2001] and Gonzalvo and Camps [2003] concerning the concept of subject); they all explore the students’ metalinguistic knowledge and metalinguistic activity and give evidence of the importance of knowing the students’ appropriation processes related to grammatical concepts. Following this type of studies some of the problems embedded in the learning of grammar have been shown (Camps, 2000a and 2007; Fisher, 2004): the difficulties students experiment to keep language apart from reality, their linear conception of relationships between words; the problem of using an ambiguous terminology, which shares its grammatical meaning with other colloquial meanings; or the fact that students’ definitions of grammatical concepts include and mix different concepts altogether, some of them false and some others in the right direction, which are not always taken up by the instructional practice. A general diagnosis, beyond the students’ academic level in grammar, would address the following items: (a) the students’ grammar knowledge, be it spontaneous or built through school practices, is poorly coherent and comes from a fair amount of intuitive glimpses and school abilities instead of sharing a part of an organized whole. It is extremely useful that the teacher may have access to the knowledge the students reveal, because it may act as a helping cue as well as a barrier blocking the acquisition of new grammar knowledge; (b) related to the
preceding item, the strategies the students use in building grammar concepts reveal the extreme diversity in their grammar knowledge; (c) as a consequence, grammar knowledge is not a question of knowing definitions, and it is tightly related to the contexts where grammar has been taught and learnt (this fact strongly interferes the possibility of calling on this knowledge in new contexts, for example in a new academic year with another teacher, or in different language teaching courses); and (d) sometimes this grammar knowledge is the proof of fossilized school practices and reveals some other problems concerning grammar school definitions.

The instructional model of didactic sequence in grammar (SDG) of Camps (1994, 1998, 2003, 2005 and 2007) tries to face and solve all these problems arising from language teaching as well as from language learning. Camps presents three types of SDG: (1) related to writing; (2) related to linguistic variation (intralinguistic or interlinguistic variation); and (3) related to grammatical concepts in mother tongue. Following Camps and her research group, what is at stake is “proving that reflective and reasoning activities concerning grammar, activities embedded in these sequences, make a difference from general grammar learning activities, mainly because they are carried on within frameworks of activities of a very different nature and because they probably activate specific processes and specific types of knowledge” (2005: 168). The goal is succeeding in the creating of “contexts” (frameworks, situations) allowing an active participation on the part of the students, the open participation of the teacher guiding the activities and an heterogeneous and multiple treatment of grammar knowledge.

Gutiérrez (1999), Camps and Fontich (2003), Fontich (2004, 2006), Vilà (2004) and Guasch, Gràcia and Carrasco (2004) make several proposals concerning the former types (2) and (3). What is implicitly worked out is the idea that reflection on language system may be carried out on real language and on the contrast between system and use, beyond the limits established either by class dynamics, by the written and prescriptive language model or by a certain language conception embedded in the school grammar books, that views grammar knowledge as a bookish and external knowledge without any relationship to the individuals using language, and conceived of as a finished and fixed knowledge. Our work tries to explore the construction processes of metalinguistic concepts in the framework of a SDG we experimented in a group of secondary education (4th course, students aged 15 and 16). The SDG focused on a grammatical aspect inevitably addressed in language courses: the sentence.