

# A View of Grammar from its Teaching Perspective

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*"Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort.  
 There must be the will to produce a superior thing."*

*John Ruskin*

To begin with, "Grammar is the business of taking a language to pieces, to see how it works.", says Crystal in his practical pocket-like book titled "Rediscover Grammar with David Crystal". According to the linguist Robert Lawrence Trask, grammar is one of the most important characteristics of a language. In fact, he talks about the "grammatical backbone", i.e. the skeleton of a language, the spine that supports the whole linguistic body. Etymologically speaking, the word *grammar* has got Greek origins -*grammatike techne*, which means "art of letters"- though it entered late Middle English via Latin trails.

"The **grammar** of a language is simply the way it combines smaller elements (such as words) into larger elements (such as sentences). Every human language has a grammar; indeed, every human language has quite a lot of grammar. [...] It is a grotesque error to believe that, somewhere out, there are languages with little or no grammar. Even the most remote languages, spoken by the least technologically advanced peoples, have masses and masses of grammar."<sup>(1)</sup> All this means that **Grammar**, one of the objects of study of Linguistics, has always existed and it has always been teachers, students and specialists' main concern at the moment of having to deal with its intrinsic and extrinsic drawbacks.

However hard it may be to believe, I first heard and learnt of English grammar when I was only a child: I still recall my parents buying me a Thompson and Martinet when I was aged only ten. By twelve, I had already absorbed piles of rules and I would have read some chapters of Eckersley and Eckersley. Curiously, some of my childhood memories come back and I can clearly remember that, while attending my primary school L1 lessons, I would apply my English grammar knowledge in order to understand and solve many of the language and grammatical questions posed by our sixth year teacher, including the syntactic analysis of statements, which had become so popular in the 1960's and 70's as well.

Most of the psychologists and specialists in the educational field these days would let us know that six-to-thirteen-year-old students' brain is not ready enough to cope with complex grammar structures, terminology or knowledge, as young children have not yet developed their abstract thinking skills. Opposed to the beliefs of some of those experts, I would venture to say, as a long-

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term teacher and student, that I have become completely aware of the fact that we human beings are already acquainted with grammar at the moment we start speaking, and even more, at the moment we begin to read. Obviously, I can understand that, at this stage, that process is almost unconscious and the capability to understand –and explain- complex rules might not be sufficient.

“Everyone reading these sentences, and understanding them, already knows the grammar of the English language. Even five-year-old children know most of it. We can see this from the way we speak. We put words together in the right order, with the right endings, and only occasionally make a mistake. We have evidently learnt the rules, and we recognise when somebody breaks them. [...] Everyone who speaks English”, and I would add, “*or other language*”, “**knows** grammar intuitively and unconsciously.” (2) Now, the mystery crops up when we think of those who might **know about** grammar, i.e. those who might be able not only to deal with the extrinsic and intrinsic technical terms of this linguistic branch, but to explain the behaviour of words within a sentence or phrase taking into consideration the grammatical rules, and also being aware of the fact that those rules are not mere opinions “about what constitutes good usage in English.” (3)

If we turned back to the past centuries, we will find out that the teaching and learning of Grammar as a subject had always been a torturing odyssey: memorizing long lists of verbs and rules, writing and speaking accurately without making mistakes, or scrutinizing nonsensical sentences in order to grasp the mechanism of its internal functioning are only a few obstacles that 19th and early 20th century teachers and students had to face when dealing with the subject of Grammar. These were only some of the principles that maintained the substantial structure of the Grammar-Translation Method, which was applied during almost a hundred years, and which would pave the way to other methodologies or approaches, such as the Direct Method and Behaviourist-Audiolingualism, carrying their teaching of L2 to the extreme of accuracy and perfection. Apparently, we cannot blame the linguists or specialists of those times, for our ancestors, including myself, would **learn about English grammar** and would all do as much as we could to apply those principles that kept the foreign language appropriately alive.

The systematizing machinery of the English language would try really hard to preserve this language pure by applying the Latin rules without taking into consideration, for instance, the fact that by the 16th century the anglo-saxon language had already lost most of its inflections. Perhaps, this was one of the reasons why the teaching and learning of grammatical rules used to be a real burden for both teachers and students of L2. Fortunately, the 1980's would cast a light upon the teaching of Grammar in a more contextualized and less demanding way as regards, basically, the making of errors. The Communicative Approach opens a window to keep L2 alive without the pressure of having to control how every single piece of language is being used or without directing the course of what we teachers (and even grammarians) may think it had to be and work.

A *battle* between, on the one hand, **traditional prescriptive grammar** (which follows the basics of Latin and Greek, known as the “best grammar”, i.e. setting rules for the correct use of English and labelling all the grammatical words) and, on the other hand, **post-modern descriptive grammar** (which carefully watches how the English language is used in different contexts and how meaning is being conveyed and understood) *will start* with the coming of the communicative trends.

The development of the concept of **communicative competence** –better communication equals better understanding of ourselves and others- goes hand in hand with the teaching of a foreign language. By tracing its theoretical source, we discover that Noam Chomsky's main concern were the **deep semantic structures**; his transformational grammar view focused on the underlying grammatical competence that was supposed to be common to all native speakers. An ideal speaker-listener in a heterogeneous community was his goal. Contrariwise, Dell Hymes and the British linguist Halliday will show us that the communicative act goes beyond Chomsky's theories. While Hymes looks at the real speaker-listener in its actual **performance and social interaction**, Halliday

focuses upon the **functions of the language**. And the latter's broad perspective is the one that prevails in the teaching of grammar today: a distinction between language form ( as seen by prescriptive linguists, the grammatical categories and their rules, for example *tenses, interrogative and negative forms, subjunctive or imperative*) and language function (as seen by descriptive linguists -the purpose of our utterances rather than the particular form they take- such as *narrating or describing, agreeing or disagreeing, requesting, asking for permission, making suggestions, giving orders, etc.*).

In our daily work as teachers we cannot forget that there exist structures and technical terms to be taught so that our students can make sense of what they listen, say or write in their using of L2. This means that it is our duty to present grammar in a way that shall not frustrate the learners; in a way that can help them become totally conscious of how the foreign language that they are learning really works. "Our job at this stage of the lesson (aided by the materials we are using) is to present the students with clear information about the language they are learning. We must show them **what** the language means and **how** it is used; we must also show them what the grammatical form of the language is, and how it is said and/or written."(4)

Our duty seems to be extremely hard, especially when we all know that the ghostly halo that surrounds Grammar is still present nowadays. Some students panic when they hear the word "Grammar"; others fail in their trying to understand and use grammar structures, or even give up studying the English language when they are faced with the constraints of its use. But as 21st century teachers we should not give up: we should help our students unravel (or untie) the "mysteries" of grammatical structures and present them as a challenge instead of a burden. This does not mean that we will manipulate those structures to make them look much easier. On the contrary, we should devote extra time to preparing our lessons so that they combine the **processes of acquisition** –by continuously exposing our students to comprehensible input- and **learning** –by drawing their attention towards the noticing of L2 use and fostering their ability to describe what they are doing with the language. "Language acquisition results from the interaction of two key factors: the innate biological structure with which humans are endowed, and human life experience, including exposure to language, The amount of language exposure we undergo in our first five or six years of life is very small in proportion to the richness and flexibility of the language systems we master during those years. Learning about language is a way of learning about ourselves."(5)

I am totally convinced that a teacher of English *learns about* grammar when he/she has to plan and prepare their lessons for their own students: squizzing the rules, looking at the language in use in its various genres and providing their students with plenty of examples and exercises to practise what has recently been learnt. I can guarantee that it happened to me, and it still happens. This training is the one we need to encourage and engage our students at the different educational levels. Besides, (and apart from the contents proposed by the local curriculum designs or the methodologies adopted by the institutions where we work at) it is crucial that we know what the **objectives** of our lessons are as well as the **interests, goals and levels** that our students indeed have. If we did not teach them the mechanisms of L2 use, they will definitely feel frustrated when they discover that what they say or write may be imprecise, ambiguous or not intelligible enough to convey the meaning carried by their messages.

I will not deny having learnt grammar in the way I did; in fact, there must be a lot of it running through my veins. But today grammar cannot be taught as it used to be done. Our society has suffered a 360° transformation, which includes social changes derived from the industrial, economic and, above all, technological global advances. Today any foreign language requires our skills to avoid presenting its grammar as a separate compartment, i.e. dissociated from this real continuously changing world.

Grammar cannot be regarded as a set of fixed unbreakable rules to be memorized without being able to understand them. Grammar cannot anymore be viewed as an isolated subject incapable of

interacting with other linguistic and non-linguistic areas. Grammar cannot be treated as the only means to achieve the structures of the target language. Perhaps, at this precise moment, you might be wondering, "What is it that we, teachers of English, are doing wrong?" The answer: we are being beaten by our fear of failing in our attempt (and why not, responsibility) to teach Grammar in a proper way.

More than **teaching** a foreign language, we should think about "[...] showing how the new language is formed – how the grammar works and how it is put together." (6) And here we might be sacrificing the proposals of some communicative approaches or methods to "eclecticize" our lessons pursuing more successful results. There are two ways of dealing with the presentation of structural forms, depending mainly on the types of studying groups we will encounter. Mini-lectures combined with a guided discovery of linguistic patterns in context (if possible, introduced via authentic material) and containing the major principles underlying English structures could be the best way of approaching grammar at an academic level, such as the university subject of Grammar taught at our School of Modern Languages. Believe it or not, our students will feel even more motivated when dealing with concepts that they have never seen before, such as the ones related to having only **two tenses** in English, the famous **split infinitive** and the **overt subject**. Our university students should become researchers rather than English grammar experts and learn where to go whenever they need to solve any linguistic question. In other words, we should provide them with the necessary tools to approach L2 and prepare the territory for their own findings, from which they could benefit and recall at the moment of learning other foreign languages.

The teaching of Grammar to primary, secondary and ESP students will require a series of strategies or stratagems to introduce the new grammatical items in a **more inductive way** so that, by presenting it within a context, we can draw our students' attention towards that item -and the way it works- and help them elicit the rules that generalize its use. The practising and exercising of those so-called rules will contribute to the reinforcing of its use and, most of all, to the applying of that item or structure at the moment of speaking, interacting or writing. A dosis of teaching energy and student synergy will contribute to the achievement of rewarding outcomes.

**Learning grammar** (and **about grammar**) is like learning how to ride a bike; once you have learnt how to do it, you never forget about it. There are not many secrets about the teaching of this subject, neither magic recipes, but there is some advice that I could humbly pass down to both my younger colleagues and teachers-to-be: learn as much as possible about grammar by reading, reading and reading different grammar books (and, if possible, by constantly exposing yourself to the target language); look carefully at the techniques and theories of the nature of language and processes of learning of different methodologies, while recycling those which are regarded as traditional ones (Why should we not apply our mother tongue whenever the circumstances require its use?); prepare lots of explanations and varied exemplifications: remember that repetition is not an enemy, but variety is the spice of life; find or produce attractive material to exploit in class; do not be afraid of games, even if you were teaching adults; show your students where to go when having a doubt about grammar; observe and listen to your students all the time and make a list of their most common errors without correcting them while they are expressing themselves; rescue the richness of the English language, the presence of its word economy and the importance of its historical and cultural background with the purpose of creating the atmosphere for individual or group oral and written productions.

Experience has lately taught me to make use of the technological devices at hand in order to awaken the students' senses (without forgetting about the phenomenon of teaching unplugged: what if there were a power cut?), foster their ability to interact and monitor themselves, and help them lose that pervasive haunting fear of grammar so as to become more confident. I am completely sure that you would also like to add the following *ingredients*, which will assist you in turning your lessons into

significant memorable moments: tons of patience, endless creativity, contagious humour and, above all, a great deal of PASSION.

*“To banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality”*  
John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*

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