Grammar and discourse in ESL

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Abstract
This paper presents a discussion on linguistic and pedagogic issues relevant for the analysis of pedagogical grammars of English, in the search for theoretical assumptions underlying linguistic descriptions. It explores linguistic discourse in pedagogical grammars with the intention of evaluating its potential for the consolidation of ESL in advanced courses and teacher education programs. The author will examine some paradigmatic samples of such grammars looking for explicit and implicit hypotheses textbook writers hold on the nature of grammar and instruction.

Introduction
This paper is based on a research project currently carried out by a group of researchers and teachers at the School of Humanities, U.N.M.D.P., under the direction of Dr. S. Martín Menéndez. It is due to this fact that some concepts and notions referred to in the present discussion have been previously presented in papers published by M. Menéndez. The author’s intention in writing this paper, though, has not been to duplicate materials but rather to make use of these notions for a better understanding of grammatical projects for EFL advanced students. Pedagogical grammars share certain characteristics concerning the discourse actions that the authors have planned to carry out in writing the grammar. To understand discourse is basically to operate on the planning of discourse.
actions that the subjects involved intend to perform. For this reason, the interpretation depends on this understanding and presupposes an adequate description and explanation of resources. (Menéndez 1998c)

Pedagogical grammars are based on a discourse plan characterized at least by the following features:

- a thorough presentation of the organization of the book

- a justification of the organization of the material on pedagogic and/or linguistic grounds

- the existence of an ideal student that is able to handle a series of highly complex concepts and notions of a technical nature

Textbooks, and more particularly grammar books, create a special discourse situation. They constitute a discourse type of special characteristics from the point of view of their use in the complex communicative situations for which they have been designed (Menéndez 1998b). Those situations involve at least 3 instances:

1) the interaction between the teacher and the student through the textbook in the classroom

2) the interaction between the student and the textbook in the absence of the teacher

3) the interaction between the book and the teacher during class preparation

The textbook is, therefore, the discourse instance where the construction of an idealized interaction between the writer/teacher and the student that will potentially use it takes place. This idealization encourages the search for
underlying assumptions and communicative possibilities considering the objectives and restrictions of such an interaction.

A typical example of a pedagogical grammar

In 1975, a new grammar book was presented, characterized as a “communicative” grammar of English (Leech & Svartvik 1975). It is worth noticing that by the time this textbook appeared, the term “communicative” was meant to be a direct path to success in second language teaching. The word was full of positive connotations but it also disguised several unrevealed assumptions that the author of the present paper will try to bring to light.

It is interesting to analyze the different types of resources - both grammatical and discourse-pragmatic (Menéndez 1998a) - used by grammar book writers to encourage comprehension of grammatical features of language with the intention of contributing to the promotion of transfer of linguistic knowledge to communicative situations. Resources tell us interesting things about the explicit and implicit assumptions on the nature of grammar and instruction held by textbook writers.

The book was presented as a new kind of grammar, intended to fulfil the needs of ESL advanced students. The discourse plan on which the book is organized is made explicit in the preface to the book, where the authors justify this organization on pedagogic and linguistic grounds.

The preface to the first edition directs a special message to the students with information about this “new perspective on grammar” and presents the original question that motivated the book organization framed from the student’s point of view: “how can I use grammar to communicate?”
The authors of this “communicative” grammar explain that the main part of the book is devoted to

“[...] the uses of grammar, rather than to grammatical structure, relating structures systematically to meanings, uses and situations.”

They assume that in this way the students will be able to improve and extend the range of communicative skill in the language. The strategy used in directing a message to the student denotes the writers’ awareness of the typical student’s interest, making reference to words that sound attractive to him or her and different from other grammatical approaches known so far. Paradoxically, the book also includes a part that “supplies the essential information about grammatical forms and structures”, intended to be used as a general reference book or sourcebook on English grammar. This last part follows the typical presentation of a more traditional grammar book with structural labels in alphabetical order. This can be taken to mean that, though innovative, the functional organization of the book does not seem to be enough a support for the student to comprehend certain complex structural features of English, and so a more formal treatment is added at the end as a resource.

There is also a message directed to the teacher. In this part the authors define their grammatical project as a fresh departure in grammar writing since it employs a communicative rather than a structural approach. Then, as is usually the case in most pedagogical grammars, they proceed to provide two fundamental reasons for emphasizing the communication aspects of learning English grammar. The first one presupposes the existence of ‘grammar fatigue’ in advanced students of English, including first year students at a university or training college. The authors believe that students may benefit from looking at grammar from another angle. The second point they make in favor of a communicative grammar centers around the “drawback” that
represents presenting grammar in terms of structure, considering students are primarily interested in making use of the language rather than in learning about its structure. In their opinion, the organization of the book in terms of meanings, use and situations is much more likely to be of use for students engaged in the process of communication.

Now, does it make sense to talk about “using grammar to communicate” as if it were a different form of communication, or is it the only form of verbal communication? Is communication possible without a grammar?

Even when the student expresses himself or herself with certain amount of ungrammaticality, it is possible to ascertain that in his or her interlanguage there is a grammar, though an imperfect one as compared to that of the native speaker. This interlanguage grammar is the scheme that directs discourse production and reception. There is no possible form of verbal communication, potentially comprehensible by its interlocutor, which is completely ungrammatical. According to recent research in the field of second language acquisition, this interlanguage is a system in its own right (Spolsky 1989: 31-34), with its own rules, i.e. it has a grammar, which is definitely not the same as the grammar of L2 but that can potentially become very near it (and in certain cases exactly like it).

And here comes the central point in question: how can we teachers take the student to the acquisition of the grammar of L2? What are the teaching and learning sequences most appropriate to bring this about? Is it through communicative grammars that describe uses and meanings of grammatical forms, as in the textbook under analysis? What is it that makes this grammar a communicative one? It is easily inferred that, in this “communicative” project, the authors would solve this inquiry by saying that it is the organization of the book around the question of “how to use grammar to communicate”, relating systematically different features of grammatical.
structure with meaning, use and situation. But, is this enough for grammar to be acquired and systematically transferred to communicative situations?

Each part of this communicative grammar is explained in great detail in the preface, though part 3 “Grammar in use” is privileged over the others since it constitutes the central idea of the book. The authors propose a conception of the process of communication in terms of four circles, each including the other, representing different types of meaning. From the inside to the outside the circles represent concepts (notional meaning), information, reality and belief (related to “logical” communication, in the authors’ words), mood, emotion and attitude, representing the “pragmatic” aspect of communication and, finally, meanings in connected discourse. The influence of Halliday’s functional grammar is evident in this section and the authors explicitly recognize it in the last part of the preface.

What might not be very convincing to the critical reader is the fact that, at the same time and in the same section, they declare that this book is based on “A Grammar of Contemporary English” (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1972), with the observation that it cannot be considered to be a condensed version of that larger work since its arrangement is totally different, and it contains additional material (especially in Part Three).

This leads us to the following inquiry: do they actually manage to reconcile these two approaches in a practical way?, or better still, is it possible to combine these two approaches in a single textbook? Are they complementary? Do they base themselves on linguistic theory that derives in the same kind of description?

Though the organization of part 3 is a functional one, based on meaning and use in specific contexts of situations, the authors make systematic reference to the formal units of language typically associated with each one of the meanings explored in the four sections. Now, in spite of the authors’ effort to
make readers notice that the relationship between meaning and form should not be taken too strictly, due to the great amount of superposition between categories and the consideration of other factors such as intonation, there seems to be little difference between this project and other grammars that are also very much concerned with meaning and use but that do not take functional notions as the organizing principles of the text, such as is the case of “A Contemporary Grammar of English”.

**Grammar as a semantic resource**

Within a functional perspective (Halliday 1994: xiv-xxvii), grammar is seen as a network of interrelated systems. Each system contains a set of options from which the speaker selects according to the meaning he or she wishes to make. The selections the speaker makes from a number of systems are realized simultaneously by grammatical items organized into structures. Thus any utterance a speaker produces represents different choices he or she has made from the systems of transitivity, tense, mood, voice and theme. In order to communicate we need to be able to select appropriate process types, participants, circumstances, and tenses; we must also select appropriate moods, modalities and polarities; at the same time we must select appropriate thematic organization and appropriate reference. Grammar provides us with a semantic resource which establishes certain constraints on what we can mean with grammar: constraints on what Halliday calls ‘meaning potential’.

Lock (1996: 267) makes the following statement in relation to this issue:

“...Seen from this perspective, grammar is not an optional add-on to communication. It lies at the very heart of communication...”.

And he goes on to say (Lock 1996: 268)
“Learning to communicate in a second language involves gaining progressive control over the systems of options in the new language; learning which options to select to make which meanings in which contexts; and mapping the configurations of grammatical functions realizing the options onto one another in structures.”

In certain parts of the “communicative” grammar under study, it seems as if the authors consider that the organization of the book in terms of meanings and use guarantee the immediate pairing with the corresponding linguistic form. Form/meaning pairings are sometimes taken for granted, disregarding the so many other factors that intervene in discourse comprehension and production.

Grammar and discourse

Rob Batstone (1995: 198-199) analyses the way in which grammar interrelates with discourse, considering the relationship between grammar and two different levels of meaning. The first level corresponds to notional meaning usually associated with semantic idealization. Pedagogic grammars make use of metalinguistic conventions in the form of form/meaning pairings which recur with great regularity across many different contexts of use. The second level of meaning has to do with the expression of attitude and as such is usually signalled covertly. Particular attitudinal meanings cannot simply be read off from the grammar but have bearings on discourse as a whole. Very often, notional meanings reside on the surface of discourse: they are stable and explicit, and in most cases it would be hard to deny them. Attitudinal meanings, on the other hand, are frequently much more delicate because they depend so much more on particular alliances of grammar, lexis, and context. They are, then, relatively unstable and thus hard to ‘ferret out’. Pedagogical grammars often fail to account for the intricacies of this level of meaning.
Grammar sets certain limits on meaning potential, yet within these limits there are pragmatic constraints (relating in part to those prior social experiences which interlocutors bring with them in any discourse encounter) which will delimit our actual freedom of interpretation. The fact that notional meanings are often so explicit and stable (in contrast with attitudinal meanings) is highly significant for critical interpretations of discourse. The expression of attitude is a central concern for Critical Discourse Analysts who seek to reveal how texts are constructed so that particular perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly. (Batstone 1995: 198, 107-108)

Batstone's conception of grammar distinguishes it from discourse in that the former encodes conceptual meanings necessary for effective and creative communication. At this level (which includes the notional/semantic), discourse interpretation is informed by grammar, providing a necessary conceptual constraint. But at the same time grammar is also a dependent on discourse. At this level (which includes the attitudinal(pragmatic) grammar is informed by the discourse context. These two levels act on each other, so that semantic and pragmatic dimensions are mutually informing.

Grammar is, then, an integral part of the process of language use, a resource which is activated more or less depending on context. To better capture the dynamism of grammar as process, Batstone (1994: 29) refers to the process of grammaticization. Language users choose how much to grammaticize according to the situation and their assumptions about how much their knowledge is shared. In Batstone's words (1994: 28)

“[...] the less we can account for shared knowledge, the more we need to call on grammar. The more shared knowledge we can assume, the more we can shift from grammar to lexis.”
Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Batstone’s view on grammar is perfectly compatible with theories of SLA of a functionalist nature. Klein (1986 in Ellis 1994: 369-370) views language learning as the mastery of fundamental functions of language – spatial and temporal reference, for example. Whereas the L1 learner learns both the functions and the means for performing them at the same time, the L2 learner has the advantage of knowing the functions beforehand. So he or she uses these as a starting point, searching the input for the linguistic devices which encode them. So, according to Klein, L2 acquisition is functionally driven and characterized by a gradual process of grammaticalization, as learners substitute grammatical for lexical means to encode specific functions (Ellis 1995: 87).

Functionalist theories of SLA are concerned not only with how linguistic knowledge is represented in the mind of the learner but also with how this knowledge is used in discourse. This group of theories assumes that syntax cannot be considered separately from semantics and pragmatics and, as such, is opposed to purely linguistic accounts of L2 acquisition.

There are studies on comprehension and production of language that confirm the role played by grammar in discourse processing. Comprehension involves three major components: perception, grammatical analysis and use (Anderson 1990 in Schunk 1997: ...). Perception consists in attending and noticing a piece of information; in the case of language comprehension, sounds turn into words in the working memory. Grammatical analysis organizes these sounds mentally into units of meaning. Use refers to the goal to which the mental representation is put, i.e. either stored in the long-term memory if it is part of a learning task, as an answer if a question has been asked, as clarification in case of misunderstanding, etc.
Grammatical analysis includes more than just an adjustment of language to the systems of production. When people are exposed to language, they construct a mental representation of the situation. They retrieve propositional knowledge about the context from the long-term memory and integrate it to the new information. A central point is that communication is always incomplete. Speakers do not provide all the information related to a topic, but rather they omit the information they assume the interlocutor already possesses (Clark and Clark 1977 in Schunk 1997: 127-186). Effective grammatical analysis requires knowledge and inference (Resnick 1985 in Schunk: 127-186). When a speaker is exposed to verbal communication, he or she retrieves information about the described situation from the long-term memory. This information is stored in networks of propositions hierarchically ordered as schemes (prototypical versions of situations). These networks make understanding of incomplete communications possible. In the process of interpretation, people include important information and omit details (Resnick 1985 in Schunk 1997: 127-186). Essential representations are made up by the propositions which are more related to comprehension. The ability of readers to get the meaning of texts depends on how much they know about the topic. When the appropriate network or scheme already exists in the mind of the student, he or she extracts the essential aspects of the piece of information to fill in the gaps in his or her scheme. On the other hand, when the need comes for a new network to be created, comprehension usually becomes slow and cumbersome.

**Universal Grammar**

Universal Grammar Theory is clearly in opposition to Functional Approaches. UG derives from Chomsky’s conceptualization of the nature of the linguistic universals that constitute a child’s innate linguistic knowledge. According to
Chomsky (1976) there is a “system of principles, conditions and rules, that are elements or properties of all human languages”. These take the form of highly abstract principles, some of which are absolute and some parameterized (i.e. afford a number of options which define the variation possible among languages). Generative linguists assume that first language acquisition would be impossible without the child’s innate knowledge of these principles and their parameters. This is because the input seriously underdetermines the final grammar that the child constructs. The child is only exposed to a subset of the total sentences possible in the target language and has no way of knowing whether a given property of the grammar has simply not been experienced in the available input or is not present in the language at all. So, it is clear that input alone cannot explain L1 acquisition. This leads us to consider what has been called ‘the logical problem of language acquisition’: what else is there that can explain the process? According to generative linguists the answer is that the child must be equipped with an innate knowledge of grammar that guides him or her in the acquisition of the grammar of a particular language. It is claimed that this innate knowledge takes the form of Universal Grammar.

It is important to consider that UG aims to account only for the child’s ‘knowledge’ of grammar, not for his or her ability to use this grammar in communication. In other words, the domain of the theory is grammatical competence, not the variable use of grammatical knowledge in actual performance (Chomsky 1965: 4). Chomsky (1980: 59) acknowledges that other types of knowledge are also needed to explain language, but he claims that ‘grammatical knowledge’ can be considered separately from them. Furthermore, the theory limits itself to an account of how the child acquires formal knowledge of grammatical properties on the grounds that these exist independently of the meanings they realize in communication. UG, therefore, assumes the autonomy of grammar. It claims that grammar exists as a
significant and autonomous phenomenon which must be studied in its own right independently of other cognitive systems such as perception, memory or problem-solving.

Though UG theory has been constructed on the basis of the native speaker’s knowledge of his or her language, it has had undeniable bearings on SLA theory. In essence, the debate concerns whether UG is or is not available to the L2 learner. Different positions have arisen concerning this issue: from a complete access position to a no-access view, including several intermediate positions that consider only a partial access to UG in SLA (White 1989 in Ellis 1995: 76). White’s position has become one of the most popular ones among second language teachers. He claims that learners have access to those universals and parameters evident in their L1, that is, they do not have a direct access to UG in the process of L2 acquisition, but rather they only have access to it through the medium of their mother tongue. UG has been operationalized by investigating whether L2 learners manifest behaviour that is compatible with their access to specific linguistic principles. The main problem lies in interpreting the behaviour that has been measured: What constitutes confirming or disconfirming behaviour? Do occasional violations to UG principles reflect ‘performance’ lapses rather than a gap in ‘competence’? These questions have not been resolved yet.

UG is, therefore, a highly restricted theory when analysed within the scope of SLA theory. It sets to explain competence as opposed to performance, grammatical competence as opposed to pragmatic competence, the formal as opposed to the functional properties of grammar, and ‘core’ rather than ‘peripheral’ properties. This limited scope is seen as desirable and even theoretically necessary by advocates of competence-based grammar who argue that ‘functional theories cannot explain the acquisition of competence’. What is important about UG is that it affords a close link between mainstream
linguistics and SLA and this gives a sense of direction that has ensured the relative popularity of UG Theory in SLA, overlooking any shortcomings in the theory itself.

**Concepts of competence**

Peter Skehan (Skehan 1995: 91-94) presents a reconceptualization of the concept of competence, starting off from the original version of the linguistic knowledge-base which underlies language performance (Chomsky 1965). The first position considered by Skehan is Hymes’ notion of ‘communicative competence’ (Hymes 1972 in Skehan 1995: 91). Hymes criticized Chomsky’s account of competence and performance and proposed that there are other competences that go beyond the linguistic domain. He claimed that communicative competence not only includes linguistic knowledge but also appropriateness of use. Hymes’ concept of competence was much more akin to the interests of teachers and students, and so it was easily assimilated into mainstream approaches. It is interesting to notice that this extended notion of competence maintains the same abstract, rule-governed nature of Chomsky’s original competence. Skehan also considers Canale and Swain’s four component competences (Canale and Swain 1983 in Skehan 1995: 92): linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic. The first three are presented as underlying knowledge systems. Linguistic competence is substantially based on Chomsky’s formulation. According to Canale and Swain, sociolinguistic knowledge includes an understanding of social relations and its impact on communication. Similarly, discourse competence includes knowledge of rules of discourse and text organization. Strategic competence, on the other hand, is compensatory in nature. It makes reference to the way in which the language user improvises his or her way to a solution, when faced with a communicative problem.

Bachman (1990 in Skehan 1995: 93) has further developed Canale and Swain’s approach into a more complex model of language competence.
Knowledge of a language is divided into organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The former is then subdivided into linguistic and textual competence. Pragmatic competence (i.e. the relationship between language and context) concerns areas such as illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence, and lexical competence. The radical change proposed by Bachman comes within the scope of ‘strategic competence’. This competence is said to be central to all communication, discharging a mediating role between meaning intentions, underlying competences, background knowledge, and context of situation. Strategic competence, defined in this way, comes much nearer the notion of performance since it does not constitute by itself a knowledge system that is triggered off whenever the need arises, but rather it acts as a mediating agent between the different components of competence and the real-time processes which influence what is actually said.

These interpretations of competence have been widely integrated into language teaching approaches in the form of objectives to be attained. Unfortunately, few textbook writers have actually suggested procedures for classroom use where the integration of these kinds of knowledge is really accounted for. In most cases, grammatical competence has been disregarded for the sake of “focusing on more communicative tasks”. The result has been a very superficial treatment of grammar. On the other hand, there have been few attempts to apply UG Theory to language pedagogy. This is primarily due to the fact that most SLA researchers who support UG principles have little interest in pedagogic issues, but there is a second reason which lies in the difficulty to show its relevance to teachers. Perhaps we must admit, as Rod Ellis has done (Ellis 1995: 88), that ‘the goals of UG Theory and language pedagogy are incompatible”. Language teachers are concerned with the whole of language, not just ‘core’ grammar, and their primary goal is to teach the ‘ability’ to use the language in communication, to use grammar in the comprehension and production of discourse rather than mere ‘knowledge’ of
rules. As a consequence, they get many more insights into teaching and learning from functional theories of SLA. In these theories the boundary between competence and performance becomes blurred and imprecise, because these two concepts are reconsidered in the broader sense proposed by language teaching.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to present a discussion of some of the theoretical issues that can aid us in the analysis of grammar books. Some of these notions come from the field of linguistics and reflect positions about the nature of language and the way in which language is represented in the users’ minds. The field of SLA has also been considered, presenting conflicting theories of second language acquisition. Other issues that have been highlighted relate directly to language pedagogy, evaluating the applicability of theoretical notions to language teaching and learning.

A central part of this article has dealt with the analysis of a particular grammatical approach presented in the form of a “communicative grammar of English”. The discourse plan followed by the authors is challenged, evaluating the efficiency of strategies used in the different parts of the book. The critical view of the “communicative” grammar presented here, though, does not intend in any case to undermine its validity as a textbook for ESL advanced students. It has simply been used as an example of the so many notions we take for granted when we follow a textbook, without carrying out a previous critical study of it to find out the implicit assumptions on which it is based. It has been the author’s intention in the present work to call the reader’s attention to the dogmatism often present in the field of language teaching, to the unquestioned submission to mainstream positions teachers sometimes experiment without taking time for reflection and analysis on the basis of their own beliefs, background and present situation.

(4534 words)
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