# O CRUZAMENTO DE SABERES NA AULA DE INGLÊS

CONTRIBUTOS PARA UMA
PRÁTICA MULTIDISCIPLINAR

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## 1. Introduction

Few issues in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) have received as much attention as that of how to teach grammar. As a central component of language, grammar has naturally been a core concern of both theorists and practitioners, and the history of EFL is marked by a long-running debate about which models of grammar might best inform descriptions of language for pedagogical purposes and which types of methodological approach are most likely to enhance learners' grammatical competence. Such questions are integral to the sub-field of grammar known as 'pedagogical grammar', understood as denoting 'the types of grammatical analysis and instruction designed for the needs of second language students' (Odlin 1994:1), and the principled exploration of these issues forms a key component of any teacher education programme.

What has largely been overlooked in the so-called 'grammar debate', however, is how grammar is seen from the perspective of learners and this chapter seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring views of grammar as revealed in informal surveys carried out with first-year *Línguas Modernas* students at the University of Coimbra. These surveys reveal evidence of how students enter higher education with markedly negative attitudes towards a subject which, curiously, they nonetheless recognize as being of central importance within their chosen area of study. It will be argued that these affective reactions result not only from methodological options in the teaching of grammar but also from underlying theoretical orientations which frame grammar in predominantly sentence-level, rule--based, and monolithic terms. This 'deficit' subject position which many

students seemingly acquire in relation to grammar is further compounded by the predominance of a product-oriented view of grammar in which it is conceptualised as a body of externalized knowledge, the rules of which must somehow be memorized as a series of largely arbitrary facts. In order for our students to arrive at more enabling subject positions regarding grammar it will be argued that we need to reconceptualise the subject within a more functional perspective, in which grammar is seen more within a discourse-oriented perspective primarily as a resource for making meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004).

The chapter begins with a brief historical overview of grammar within EFL, highlighting how approaches have shifted in accordance with prevailing theoretical and methodological orthodoxies, and argues that the reemergence of grammar in recent decades following its relative abandonment in the heyday of communicative language teaching offers an opportunity to build upon traditional formal approaches by using insights gained from systemic functional linguistics. This is followed by initial discussion of the survey data (a representative sample of which is presented as an appendix to this chapter), which, using the data merely as a point of departure, seeks to characterize students' conceptions of grammar as they enter university. Extrapolating further from the student data, the final section, in arguing for a reconceptualisation of grammar in more functional terms, puts forward some ways in which teachers could broaden their understanding of grammar for pedagogical purposes and, in so doing, enrich their students' classroom experience of the subject.

## 2. The place of grammar teaching within EFL

To give a potted history of grammar teaching within EFL would be in a sense to trace the history of the profession itself since debates around grammar have always been a central, and at times highly contested, part of the professional discourse of teaching. Indeed, as Thornbury (1999:14) points out, 'no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially

the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar.' While theorists now argue strongly in favour of integrating some kind of form-focused instruction within a broadly communicative framework (Nassaji & Fotos 2011), practitioners in the classroom can only reach an informed understanding of this present consensus through a critical examination of past practices. Such an understanding must also include an awareness of how pedagogical grammar must be seen as 'a practically oriented hybrid drawing on work in several fields' (Odlin 1994:11), prominent amongst which would be the field of descriptive grammar. In this regard, two contemporary models of grammar are usually highlighted and, at the risk of over-simplifying somewhat, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that each model offers distinctive theoretical perspectives on language.

The first model, that of generative or formal grammar (associated primarily with Chomsky), is concerned primarily with the structure of language at sentence level and largely disregards semantics and pragmatics, while the second, that of functional grammar (associated primarily with Halliday) foregrounds meaning and use as it seeks to explain how linguistic structures are chosen in accordance with specific communicative purposes in particular social contexts. Since the former can be characterised as an *intra*-personal model which seeks to explicate language in terms of properties of the mind, and the latter as an *inter*-personal model concerned with how language both shapes, and is shaped by, social use, it is little surprise to find that it is predominantly scholars working broadly within the functional school who have displayed a sustained engagement with teacher education over the past six decades (see, for example, Coffin, Donohue & North 2009; Halliday, McIntosh, & Strevens 1964; Halliday & Hasan 1976; McCarthy 1991) and major pedagogical reference grammars published in recent decades have all been predominantly influenced by work in functional linguistics (Biber, Johansson, Leech & Conrad 1999; Biber, Conrad & Leech 2002; Carter & McCarthy 2006; Sinclair 1990).

This binary distinction between formal and functional approaches is evident as we look back upon the competing claims and counterclaims within grammar teaching, for if in the current climate of consensus it is

asserted that form-focused instruction once more has its place, then the period of its relative demise can be located within the heyday of communicative language teaching (CLT) during the 1970s and 1980s which, in its strong form at least, argued against any explicit focus on form, believing that grammatical structures would be acquired simply through the students' practice of meaningful communicative tasks. It should be noted that CLT was, in itself, a reaction to the narrow conception of grammatical competence as reflected in the structural syllabuses of the 1960s, and drew upon the highly influential notion of 'communicative competence', a term coined by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1972), who saw the 'rule-governed creativity' of Chomsky's (1965) notion of grammatical competence as insufficient to explicate social and functional rules of language use.

While it might be argued then that the formal/functional binary distinction is reflected in shifting paradigms within EFL, a note of caution should be sounded here insofar as such a division, in practical terms, can be seen as over-simplistic (Larsen-Freeman 2001), and it is questionable to what extent it is actually reflected in the more eclectic and pragmatically-based decision making which informs classroom practice itself. As such, the current climate of principled eclecticism with regard to grammar teaching offers an opportunity to build upon the knowledge base represented by traditional formal analysis by supplementing this with insights gained from functional linguistics (Coffin, Donohue & North 2009; Jones & Lock 2011).


## 3. Students' conceptions of grammar upon entering university

The central role accorded to grammar within EFL is reflected in the fact that first-year language courses for students taking English at the University of Coimbra have traditionally focused primarily upon revising and consolidating students' understanding of the English grammatical system. As a teacher for many years on such courses, my initial aim at the very beginning of each course was naturally to find out how students

entering higher education stood in relation to the subject matter of the course. For this purpose an initial awareness-raising task was carried out in which students were asked simply to write as many sentences containing the word "grammar" as they could think of in five minutes, the strict time limit ensuring that the sentences produced tended to be both pithy and wide-ranging. These sentences were then collected in and a selection were dictated back to the students along with other sentences of my own designed to reflect more closely some of the perspectives on grammar which the course aimed to explore. Students were required to categorise the sentences in the act of dictation by assigning them to one of a number of opinion columns ('I agree/ I disagree/ Our teacher probably agrees/ etc') (Davis & Rinvolucri 1988:80), comparisons of which formed the basis for subsequent group discussions both on the class's conceptions of grammar and what might lie behind them. Given the range of common errors revealed in the students' sentences (e.g. appendix sentences 9, 25, 27 and 33), the activity also served a diagnostic purpose, as well as providing an initial opportunity for error correction and developing the requisite metalinguistic awareness for error analysis, both of which constitute key aims of the course.

While not wishing to claim any particular methodological rigour for the process by which these data were collected, the hundreds of sentences gathered in this way over the years nonetheless comprise a corpus of informal survey data which provides some interesting insights into students' perspectives of grammar as they enter tertiary education. Having emanated from one particular pedagogic context, that of first--year university language courses, the sample of sentences collected in the appendix was later used as material for an introductory discussion in post-graduate language courses for trainee teachers. In seeking to raise participants' awareness of pedagogical approaches to grammar, the task now became one of categorizing the sentences into groups of similar meaning and in so doing identify what they saw as being salient features of students' conceptions of grammar. The discussion which follows draws in large part upon issues raised by trainee teachers as they completed this activity.

### 3.1. '*Grammar is …*': defining grammar

In the initial first-year sentence-writing activity any prior definition of terms was deliberately avoided so as not to preempt the content of their sentences in any way. Even so, it is interesting to note the extent to which the sentences produced encompass the multi-dimensionality of the term *grammar* as defined in this entry from a general purpose native-speaker dictionary:

> 1. the branch of linguistics that deals with syntax and morphology, sometimes also phonology and semantics. 2. the abstract system of rules in terms of which a person's mastery of his native language can be explained. 3. a systematic description of the grammatical facts of a language. 4. a book containing an account of the grammatical facts of a language or a recommendation as to rules for the proper use of a language. 5. the use of a language with regard to its correctness or social propriety, esp. in syntax: *the teacher told him to watch his grammar*. (*Collins English Dictionary, 1994*).

Using this definition as a means of initially framing the analysis of the sample sentences with trainee teachers, a number of key questions relevant to pedagogical grammar can immediately be raised.

Firstly, the traditional understanding of grammar as focusing essentially upon morpho-syntactic features, as seen in sense (1) above, underpins the commonly held views expressed in student sentences (7), (14) and (17), in which it is assumed that the perceived relative 'simplicity' of English grammar arises both from its lack of inflections and from its comparatively fixed word order. From a teacher's perspective, this narrowly formalist perspective has profound pedagogical consequences if grammar is thereby seen as an autonomous, context-free system which, as defined above, is only 'sometimes also' related to other linguistic systems such as phonology and semantics, and in this respect it is striking how few students associate grammar in any way with meaning in their sentences, examples such as sentences (8) and (45) being all too rare. Clearly then, a teacher's notion of pedagogical grammar must draw upon richer, more

pedagogically relevant models of grammar than that which is alluded to in sense (1) above.

Secondly, the sense of grammar as an abstract system of rules, as seen in sense (2) above, clearly draws upon the Chomskyan mentalistic notion of a universal, innate language competence. Although this notion of grammar as a rule-governed system is alluded to frequently in the student data (see, for example, student sentences (3), (6), (9) and (38)), its relevance to pedagogical grammar when acquiring a foreign language is problematic since, as will be discussed below, the highly abstract and idealized nature of such rules does not always lend itself easily to explicit instruction in the classroom.

Thirdly, it should be underlined that while the term 'pedagogical grammar' is necessarily absent from what is a non-technical dictionary, some of its key constitutive elements could be said to be subsumed within senses (3) to (5) above. Sense (3), for example, as a definition of descriptive grammar, provides the evidential corpus upon which pedagogical grammarians base their formulations, and recent advances in corpus linguistics have led to corpus-based pedagogical grammars (as in sense (4) above and student sentence (41)) of ever greater detail and descriptive range, particularly in relation to the grammar of spoken English, an area which had hitherto been largely ignored (Biber, Conrad & Leech 2002; Carter & McCarthy 2006). This descriptive conception contrasts with the prescriptive tone which defines grammar, as in sense (4), as 'a recommendation as to rules for the proper use of a language' or, as in sense (5), 'with regard to its correctness or social propriety'. It should be noted, however, that pedagogical grammar, as a hybrid construct drawing upon a number of differing conceptions of grammar, necessarily entails a degree of prescription (Odlin 1994), and students' strong associations of grammar with notions of 'correctness' (as seen, for example, in sentences (32), (37), (39)) would indicate that a degree of prescription is inevitably involved in teaching grammar.

### 3.2. *'Grammar is the most important thing in any language'* versus *'Grammar is boring'*

Having established an initial framework for analyzing the student sentences which draws upon these mainstream definitions, discussion with trainee teachers proceeded to identify a number of salient categories, the first of which centres upon what might seem a curious contradiction between, on the one hand, a clear recognition of the centrality of grammar (e.g. sentences (10), (15), (42) and (45)) and, on the other hand, what might be termed a 'deficit' subject position expressed by many students, in which emotions of anxiety, disengagement and personal inadequacy loom large (e.g. sentences (1), (2), (5), (16), and (19)). Given the crucial role of affective factors in language learning, the harmful impact upon language learning of such negative emotions cannot be over-estimated and underlines how the treatment of error is a key methodological issue in grammar teaching. In this respect, while some students' professed difficulties with grammar are unwittingly revealed within the very same sentences (e.g. sentences (25), (27), and (33)), and clearly cannot be ignored by any teacher, the effect of too great an emphasis upon 'corrective' grammar could well be counter-productive insofar as it might inhibit students' experimentation with language.

A further observation made in relation to these sentences concerns how students frequently choose to conceptualise their recognition of grammar's centrality in metaphorical terms, and it is instructive to examine more closely the choice of metaphors since in themselves they are suggestive of certain perspectives on grammar. In this regard, while relatively 'static' metaphors related to anatomy (sentence 15), maths (sentence 22), machines (sentence 29) or engineering (sentence 43) may be appropriate for the purposes of dissecting and analyzing grammar, it is significant that more organic metaphors which might view grammar as a living phenomenon which is subject to change and growth are conspicuously absent. As Rutherford (1987:37) points out, the mechanic versus the organic are, in fact, complementary metaphors of language: 'Both metaphors are needed, for language has *form* as well as *function*; it has

aspects that are *static* and others that are *dynamic*; we look at language *product* in addition to language *process*; we ascribe part of the language complex to *competence*, part of it to *performance*.'


### 3.3. *'We must know all the rules of grammar'*


This tendency to view language as a static, external phenomenon is reflected in the way in which many students have come to see grammar in the classroom as being essentially about the learning of a set of discrete and seemingly arbitrary rules (along with what are perceived as equally arbitrary exceptions, of course). This perspective can be seen for example in sentences (3), (9), (13), (25), and (38), and while not wishing to deny the rule-governed basis of language, a number of important pedagogical issues are raised by the striking predominance of such sentences in the student corpus.

Firstly, it should be understood that the ability to identify and provide clear and effective feedback on the type of learner errors revealed, for example, in sentences (9), (25) and (33) clearly forms a key component of any teacher's basic professional competence and developing this skill involves a growing understanding of how pedagogical grammar rules operate. It should be recognized, however, that a number of complex practical issues need to be borne in mind when formulating such rules. An informal definition of a language rule as 'observed regularity with predictive value' (Westney 1994:74) holds that a rule should be based on attested usage and be generally applicable in the grammar, and is thus, as Westney points out, 'a gradable rather than an absolute concept'. Further-more, a rule's application within a pedagogical context means that it must above all else be seen as being relevant to learners' needs. In this respect, Swan (1994), in formulating a number of design criteria for pedagogic rules, warns that teachers 'will often need to compromise with truth for the sake of clarity, simplicity, conceptual parsimony or relevance' (Swan 1994:46). It should be noted, however, that such considerations apply less to the type of basic morpho-syntactic errors displayed in sentences (9),

(25) and (33), an observation which underlies a distinction commonly made in pedagogical grammar between rules of formation and rules of use, 'the former concerning mechanical regularities in language and the latter matters of personal meaning and choice' (Westney 1994:74-75). Such a distinction serves to remind teachers that notoriously complex areas of English grammar, such as the use of articles, are not amenable to rote learning and demand that students are exposed more to language at the level of discourse.

While the status of pedagogical grammar rules, then, is by no means clear-cut, and, it should be added, the efficacy of such rules in relation to second language acquisition remains largely unproven, a further pedagogical issue arises in connection with the tendency to present these rules in largely sentence-level terms. This is reflected in the students' commonly expressed understanding of grammar in terms of sentence production, as seen for example in sentences (8), (21), and (30), which might be seen as a legacy of formal grammar's traditional analytic focus. When considered alongside the students' close association of grammar with correctness (e.g. sentences (32) (35) and (39)), it might be argued that too pronounced an emphasis upon the production of correct sentences may actually serve to inhibit a learner's hypothesis formation regarding grammar and thus discourage the kind of risk-taking so essential to effective language learning (Brown 1994:130).

A further problem with such an emphasis is that grammar is then taught and tested largely at sentence-level, and while recourse to the decontextualised single sentence is, at times, an unavoidable methodological option within grammar teaching, an over-reliance on this approach leads to a failure to recognize the connections between grammar and higher-order contextual features of register and genre. The tendency amongst some grammar practice books (e.g. Sottomayor 2011) to present language almost exclusively in sentence-level terms encourages the belief that 'learning the grammar' consists of little more than working one's way through exercises comprised largely of decontextualised sentences invented to illustrate specific grammar points. Such exercises are not only demotivating for students (as indicated by sentence (28)), but also

often present language in a highly unnatural form, with little regard for common patterns of use as revealed, for example, in recently published pedagogical reference grammars informed by corpus linguistics (Biber, Conrad & Leech 2002; Carter & McCarthy 2006).

Extrapolating a little further from the student sentences, it could also be argued that this perspective of 'grammar as rules' stems in part from the students' exposure to predominantly transmission-oriented methods of grammar teaching in which knowledge, in the form of learnable rules, is simply imparted to learners irrespective of whether the rule itself is adequately formulated or if the learners themselves are necessarily in any position developmentally to make sense of it. This expository mode of teaching is what Thornbury (1999:17), in outlining the various claims in support of grammar teaching, refers to as 'the rule-of-law' argument, pointing out that 'such a view is typically associated with the kind of institutionalized learning where rules, order and discipline are highly valued'. While this approach, then, may have ecological validity in certain educational contexts and clearly meets the needs many students naturally have for rules as providing a form of psychological security, it may at the same time contribute, paradoxically, to the marginalization of grammar within the classroom insofar as it relegates treatment of this central component of language to the so-called grammar slot, which, typically, is comprised of deductive presentations followed by gap-filling practice exercises.

In addition, the rule-of-law argument raises a further issue which is particularly pertinent for relatively inexperienced teachers, who, in their wholly understandable anxiety to appear authoritative with regard to their subject matter, may at times revert to a more authoritarian mode of teaching which permits only the narrowest interpretation of what might be considered grammatically correct. This pedagogical conflation of 'authoritative' and 'authoritarian' is hardly a fanciful notion if grammar itself comes to be seen metaphorically as the site of order and a defence against lawlessness. In discussing the heated and ideologically-charged debate around first-language grammar teaching, which took place in the United Kingdom in the final decades of the previous century, Cameron (1995) concedes that such a metaphor is in some respects appropriate

in that grammar, when co-opted in such terms, can be interpreted as 'a *traditional* practice imposing *order* on languages by describing their structure in terms of *hierarchical rules* which have *authority* for speakers' (Cameron 1995:97).

### 3.4. *'There is a lot of grammar'*

A corollary to this rule-based perspective of grammar can be seen in the students' conception of grammar as a quantifiable, externalized body of knowledge. Sentences such as (4), (23) and (40) view grammar very much as a product, and again, while not wishing to deny the validity of such a perspective for analytical purposes, it is important to reflect both upon the origin of such a view and its potentially negative effects pedagogically, particularly since so few students seem to conceptualise grammar in more process terms.

A product perspective on grammar is, of course, inherent in any attempt to codify language, and it is such a perspective which has provided teachers, in the form of reference grammars and dictionaries, with ways of organizing and making sense of this complex phenomenon. A consequence of this, however, is that it is the product rather than process perspective which is perhaps more familiar to most teachers (Batstone 1994:5). The resulting tendency to view language in essentially static terms is reinforced by what van Lier (1995:113) characterizes as the 'covering urge' in many syllabuses and coursebooks, which 'look at the target language as a product, itemized and inventoried, and proceed to 'cover' as much as possible in successive lessons' (van Lier 1995:114). It is little surprise, then, that students should come to see grammar as this rather intimidating external phenomenon which, in their own words, comprises 'a very large area of the English language.' What such a view fails to recognize, however, is the crucial role which grammar plays in creating context, and a reconceptualisation of grammar would seek rather to emphasise its potential as a resource which can be activated in the process of language use.

To summarise this section, what has emerged as salient in discussing the sample of student sentences with trainee teachers is a view of grammar which in many respects is deeply puzzling coming from a group of students who have chosen to study languages at university. While there is clear recognition objectively of grammar's central role, there is at the same time an overwhelming subjective sense of negativity, the potential causes of which need to be carefully reflected upon by language educators. In this respect, a number of related issues have been identified which may contribute to students having acquired such a disturbingly negative stance. Firstly, there is what might be called the 'grammar as rules' perspective, in which grammatical competence is seen as being acquired largely through the rote learning of discrete-item rules. Secondly, a 'grammar as sentences' perspective can be identified in which a predominantly transmission-oriented form of pedagogy seeks to impart such rules mainly by reference to decontextualised single sentences. Thirdly, these perspectives give rise to a 'grammar as product' perspective in which the grammatical system is perceived in static terms and appears almost to loom threateningly over the student as an externalized body of testable knowledge. Since conceptualising grammar in such terms appears to give rise to subject positions on the part of students, which are clearly inimical to effective learning, it is therefore vital to consider alternative approaches which might serve to reconceptualise grammar in more appealing ways.

## 4. Reconceptualising grammar

### 4.1. From 'grammar as rules' to 'grammar as patterns of choice'

A key problem in placing too strong an emphasis upon explaining grammar in terms of a set of rules is that this raises an expectation among students that the rules themselves are incontrovertible. This understanding of grammar as an absolute concept may hold for the types of lower-level errors displayed in the student sentences in the appendix, but becomes

problematic if applied more widely. For Chalker (1984:7) this is one of the most popular misconceptions about grammar: '… that the 'rules' are somehow there in the language more or less ready formulated, waiting to be dug up. According to this view there can only be one 'correct' solution to any grammatical problem.' Given this relative indeterminacy it is worth noting that recent pedagogical reference grammars have tended to frame descriptions less in terms of rules, favouring more top-down approaches in an attempt to convey the systematic and meaningful nature of the grammatical system. One such approach is outlined in the introduction to one of the key EFL publications in recent years, *The Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Conrad & Leech 2002:2), itself a pedagogical offshoot from an earlier landmark grammar (Biber, Johansson, Leech, & Conrad 1999):

> Every time we write or speak, we are faced with a large array of choices: not only choices of what to say but of how to say it. The vocabulary and grammar that we use to communicate are influenced by a number of factors, such as the reason for the communication, the setting, the people we are addressing, and whether we are speaking or writing. Taken together, these choices give rise to systematic patterns of choice in the use of English grammar. Traditionally, such patterns have not been included as part of grammar. Most grammars have focussed on structure, describing the form and (sometimes) meaning of grammatical constructions out of context.

The significance of this as an approach to pedagogical grammar lies in the way in which it foregrounds the notion of choice, providing a framework in which the use of grammar and vocabulary (and note how the two are now conjoined) can be related to specific factors in the social context. Such an approach is based upon the concept of register, or 'language variety according to use', (Halliday and Hasan 1985/89), in which the three contextual variables of field, tenor and mode provide a bridge between context and language when analyzing text.

These variables are alluded to in the above quote, since field refers to the topic, activity or purpose of a text, tenor to the kind of social roles

enacted, while mode covers the channel of communication being used (most simply, spoken versus written). Later refinements of the model allow both for a more nuanced approach to mode (incorporating multi-modal texts, for example) and a more pedagogically appealing metalanguage which provides teachers with an accessible framework for text analysis in the classroom (see, for example, Coffin, Donohue & North 2009:191-241 ; Montgomery 2008:123-157).

What is provided in the two Longman grammars referred to above, meanwhile, is an innovative attempt to link grammatical description to corpus-based findings across four distinctive registers (conversation, fiction, newspaper language, and academic prose), an approach which led its authors to conclude that 'it is simply inaccurate or misleading to think of a general pattern of use for English; instead, each register has distinctive patterns, associated with its communicative priorities and circumstances' (Biber, Johansson, Leech, & Conrad 1999:24). And while there may always be some risk of unnecessarily over-stating the extent of these differences to our students, such findings have led in particular to increasing awareness of the particularities of spoken mode, with the welcome result that the highly unnatural invented dialogues formerly found in coursebooks to illustrate particular grammatical points have largely disappeared in favour of texts which conform more naturally to the properties of spoken grammar as detailed, for example, in Biber, Conrad & Leech (2002:427-454).

It should be noted that conceptualising grammar, in these terms, draws upon the more semantically oriented model of Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004), in which the three register variables of field, tenor and mode are mapped on to the three general areas of meaning underpinning the lexico-grammatical system represented by the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. This link is significant insofar as it guards against the risk of falling into the trap of seeing the relationship between register and grammar in overly deterministic terms and promotes a more dynamic perspective on grammar which is able to explore pedagogically the reflexive nature of the relationship between linguistic choices and the socio-cultural context. Analytical tasks which

ask students to compare texts in which one of the contextual variables is modified (by changing the tenor to that of a more distanced, formal relationship, for example) serve to raise awareness in this regard (e.g. Coffin, Donohue & North 2009:227-228). Exploratory tasks of this nature also underline how reconceptualising grammar as patterns of choice implies a significant methodological shift away from the expository teaching of rules towards approaches which encourage students to notice salient patterns within texts and thus begin to form their own generalisations about grammar. Such an approach also encourages students to think *about* language, and the educational value of this kind of 'grammatical consciousness-raising' (Rutherford 1987) is captured well in a particularly insightful comment from the student corpus: 'Grammar mustn't be memorized – it must be understood' (sentence 18).


## 4.2. From 'grammar as sentences' to 'grammar as discourse'

As discussed earlier, a damaging pedagogical consequence of the rule-based perspective was that grammar is taught and tested predominantly at sentence-level, such an approach presupposing that grammatical choices are thereby confined to sentence-level factors. This approach might be seen as a legacy of formal linguistics, which, taking the sentence as its analytic focus, saw the grammatical system as autonomous and context-free. Any shift in emphasis away from focusing upon grammar in terms of rules is, therefore, naturally accompanied by a corresponding move towards exploring how the grammatical system also operates above sentence level. Understanding, as opposed to memorizing, grammar in this sense demands awareness then of how grammatical choices relate to both context (understood as the social environment) and co-text (or the linguistic environment). It should be noted, however, that such awareness should not preclude the recognition that choices are at times highly constrained, either by lexical patterning (as in student sentence (44)) or by so-called rules of formation (as in student sentence (25)), the latter, with its error of determiner-noun agreement, standing as a rare example of what might

be termed 'a context-free, sentence-based rule' (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000:52). Nevertheless, the fact remains that very few grammatical choices function in such strictly sentence-level terms, and this only underlines the importance of integrating discourse-level treatments of grammar into teacher education programmes. Such an approach would seek to raise awareness, for example, of how an understanding of cohesion can help to identify grammatical and lexical relations across clause and sentence boundaries (Halliday and Hasan 1976; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 524--585), as well as how grammatical items are influenced by discourse-level patterning features such as information structure (McCarthy 1991; Yule 1998). A discourse-oriented approach to grammar also has implications for course design and would signal a move away from a more structural approach to one influenced more by higher order features of language, such as genre. The particular importance of grammatical competence in the production of written discourse, for example, points to how genre--based teaching is an ideal means of integrating grammar teaching within skills work (e.g. Hughes 2005).

It should also be noted in passing that this shift of focus, away from sentence-level analysis towards supra-sentential features, has not necessarily been at the expense of pedagogical interest in sub-sentential patterning. Indeed, in a survey of recent trends within EFL, Widdowson (2004:358-359) points to this as 'the most striking finding of corpus analysis, namely the primacy of lexis as a determining factor in the patterning of usage'. This finding only underlines the indivisibility of grammar and vocabulary in any semantically-oriented approach to grammar teaching, even if student sentences such as (36) might suggest that the two are still given separate treatment in the classroom. While the preference for the term 'lexico-grammar' in functional linguistics may indeed have little practical value pedagogically, the recognition of 'lexis as delicate grammar' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004:65) might encourage an approach to vocabulary teaching which emphasized a lexical item's syntagmatic patterning alongside its meaning, and publications arising, for instance, from the COBUILD project (e.g. Sinclair 1990; 2004) have shown how the foregrounding of lexical patterning can be integrated within grammar

teaching. Alongside developments then in discourse-level approaches (or 'text grammar'), teachers need to be aware of how our understanding of 'word grammar' has been greatly enhanced by developments in corpus linguistics, pedagogical applications of which can be seen in innovative publications such as *Natural Grammar* (Thornbury 2004), which imaginatively explores lexical patterning around one hundred of the most common words in the language.

## 4.3. From 'grammar as product' to 'grammar as process'

A final shift in emphasis which might serve to reconceptualise grammar in the classroom is, in its concern with grammar as process, concomitant with a discourse-oriented perspective on language and goes to the heart of recognizing how grammar functions dynamically in both shaping, and being shaped by, context. In arguing for such a shift it is worth underlining, once again, that this is not to necessarily deny the value pedagogically of approaching grammar descriptively as product, but rather to point out that such an approach is of only limited value in transforming our students' declarative knowledge of grammar into procedural knowledge. In other words, there is no reason to assume that teaching grammar as noun-like product, as found typically in the accumulated lists of discrete grammatical items in structural syllabuses, will necessarily lead to mastery of the more verb-like nature of grammar as process. As Thornbury (2001:2) points out, such an approach fails to differentiate the 'thing' from the 'doing', in other words, 'that there is *grammar* and *grammaring*, and the latter is not easily inferable from the former. In short, a description of used language is not the same as language being used.'

The dangers of this approach are all too evident in the corpus of student sentences, in which observations such as 'there is a lot of grammar' betray the extent to which students come to feel daunted by such reification. What such a view fails to recognize is the dynamic role of grammar as a resource for making and exchanging meaning and, crucially, whose degree of activation is determined by contextual factors. In this respect

it is salutary to raise learners' awareness of how at times there is indeed very little grammar at all. Batstone (1994:32) illustrates this neatly with the following reflective task: 'How much world-creating grammar might be deployed in each of the following contexts? (1) Two friends check through their shopping list one final time before entering a supermarket. (2) The two friends return from the supermarket with their shopping. On reaching the door to their flat, they realize that they no longer have their keys. They discuss where the keys might be.' In completing this task students come to see naturally how the more lexicalized exchange employed in the first situation results from participants' shared knowledge, whereas the 'grammaring' called for in the second situation arises precisely from the need to create a shared context of mutual understanding.

This rather obvious insight has profound methodological implications insofar as it suggests that teachers might actually be teaching grammar most effectively not when they are explaining rules but rather when they are facilitating the noticing of such knowledge gaps and providing learners with the means to bridge them through 'grammaticization' activities (Rutherford, 1987). This means that teachers need to plan for activities which allow for 'emergent' grammar (Thornbury 2001), in the sense of grammar being deployed to overcome such distance, whether this be cognitive (as, for example, in the highly complex grammar needed for wording hypothetical meanings), social (as, for example, in how the past tense's core sense of remoteness establishes politeness) or the kinds of knowledge gaps illustrated in the task from Batstone (1994) above. This conception of grammar as 'fine-tuning', while challenging traditional teacher roles, can be seen to inform pedagogic materials which manage to approach grammar in pedagogically appealing ways without trivializing or marginalizing its central role (see, for example, Thornbury 2005b; Jones & Lock 2011).

## 5. Conclusion

Reconceptualising grammar in the terms suggested above should be seen within the broader context of promoting language awareness within

English language teacher education, whether this be in the narrower sense of developing explicit knowledge about the underlying systems of language (Thornbury 1997) or in the wider sense of exploring language from the socio-cultural perspective of language-in-use (van Lier 1995; Arndt, Harvey & Nuttall 2000). In both senses, the route towards the goal of developing more linguistically-aware teachers involves a particular focus upon developing competence as a language analyst, which is seen as one of the key competences which an English teacher needs (Edge 1988). Such a focus in teacher education would be likely to lead to improved language analysis at the lesson planning stage and would result in an analytical approach to grammar that would attend more comprehensively to the form, meaning and use of any given grammatical item. The more discoursal perspective on language found within this analytical framework would also equip the teacher at the planning stage to make a more principled selection of appropriate texts. Once in the classroom, the effects are mostly likely to be felt in the changing teacher roles implied by the shifts of emphasis outlined above, in particular the move away from a transmission model with its predominantly expository mode of teaching to one in which learning is facilitated more through inductive and discovery procedures, and it is hoped that through such methodological developments learners' negative attitudes towards grammar, as expressed so clearly in the survey data, will eventually be transformed.

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**Student 'grammar' sentences**

The sentences below comprise a representative sample of students' views of grammar as revealed in informal surveys carried out with first-year *Línguas Modernas* students at the University of Coimbra between 1996 and 2011.

1. Grammar is a subject that scares many people.
2. Grammar is boring.
3. Grammar is a group of rules that we have to use when we use language.
4. There is a lot of grammar.
5. Grammar makes me doubt my capacities.
6. Grammar is something that we know about in other languages but something we ignore in our own.
7. English grammar is easier than German grammar.
8. Grammar is something that gives sense to a sentence.
9. There is rules of grammar in every languages, all over the world.
10. Grammar is the most important thing in any language.
11. Grammar is composed with verbs.
12. Grammar takes many hours of my time.
13. The rules are all difficult in grammar.
14. English grammar is not a very complicated thing to study.
15. Grammar is language's skeleton.
16. Grammar is the best thing to "chumbar" in English I.
17. English grammar is not as difficult as Portuguese grammar.
18. Grammar mustn't be memorized – it must be understood.
19. Grammar doesn't capture the attention of many people.
20. The best way to learn grammar is to practise it.
21. Grammar is very important when we want to write a sentence.
22. Grammar is like maths.
23. I want to know all the grammar.
24. We know grammar even when we don't think about it.
25. Grammar has too much rules to attend to.
26. Grammar is the plan of the language.
27. I have very difficulties with grammar.
28. I don't like grammar exercises.
29. Grammar is a word to describe all the mechanisms that make a language work.
30. Grammar helps us to construct sentences.

31. It's far more difficult to explain grammar than use it.

32. Grammar allows us to speak English correctly.

33. Grammar it's where all the language difficulties are.

34. Grammar allows us to understand why we use certain verb forms.

35. Grammar is something that's meant to correct our linguistic flaws.

36. I prefer vocabulary to grammar.

37. Grammar is important for us in order to make correct sentences.

38. We must know all the rules of grammar.

39. We need grammar to write correct English.

40. Grammar is a very large area of the English language.

41. It's very important to know how to consult a grammar.

42. Language without grammar isn't a language at all.

43. Grammar is a language's engineering.

44. I am not very good in grammar.

45. Without grammar people couldn't communicate.