

The teaching of grammar revisited. Listening to the learners' voice¹

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This study stemmed from the result of general weaknesses detected in the teaching of grammar within the specific context of the English Philology curriculum at the University of Santiago. A survey was conducted to find out the views of English majors on grammar teaching with the purpose of implementing the existing programme. The results obtained indicate that students see value in the study of grammar although they are more in line with practical, descriptive and functional approaches rather than with theoretical, prescriptive and formal perspectives to language. Learners' general assessment of grammar courses in the English Philology curriculum is quite positive. Syntax is students' preferred area of grammar and self-discovering activities are rated highly; however, they question the relevance of grammatical terminology and the usefulness of contrastive analysis. The paper concludes by suggesting the need to explore new approaches to the teaching of grammar which will be based on the use of new technologies, such as the Internet, and general and learner corpora.

Key words: grammar, corpus, language awareness, data-driven, technology

Introduction

This study had its origin in a research project conducted in the first term of the 2004-2005 academic year. This preliminary study was replicated under similar conditions one year later, that is, in November 2005. General deficiencies were detected in the teaching of grammar and it was necessary to search for possible solutions. I was interested in getting to know students' opinions on grammar teaching with a view to implementing the existing programmes.

In the last decade or so I have been involved in the teaching of grammar courses to English Philology students as part of my professional duties at the University of Santiago. They are four-month courses, approximately 45 hours long, mainly concerned with the study of basic concepts in grammar, the structure of the different phrases, from the noun phrase to the possessive phrase, the analysis of the simple clause and the complex and compound sentences (paratactic structures, clause embedding, subordination and general interclausal connections). In most of these seminars students are also initiated into sentence parsing and text analysis. The methodological procedures used are mainly plenary lectures, critical reading of some descriptive grammars (Quirk *et al.*, 1985; Huddleston, 1984, 1988; Downing and Locke, 1994; Aarts, 1997; Biber *et al.*, 1999; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002) and some practical exercises and tasks. At the beginning of every unit students are given a hand-out with the lesson outline prepared beforehand; this also includes a number of activities conceived to put into practice the theory issues presented in the different sessions. At the end of every unit students take a

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self-assessment test to evaluate their own progress in the course and to identify deficiencies and areas which may require remedial work.

As mentioned above, this piece of research emerged as the result of my dissatisfaction with my own work. The results obtained in terms of learners' development could not be considered negative; however, I perceived that the students were not motivated enough and consequently were not deeply involved in the grammar lessons. Although I tried hard to make them participate and a small group of them actually did, my teaching was clearly teacher-fronted rather than learner-centred. This made me look for alternative ways to teach grammar and it also stimulated me to investigate students' attitudes and opinions on their perceptions of grammar and its pedagogy.

As in most cases when exploring a particular feature of the learning of a second language, there is a tendency to have recourse to a similar area in the first language. However, it should be clearly stated from the beginning that the teaching of grammar to native speakers is completely different from the teaching of grammar to non-natives (Williams, 1994: 109-110). The former are fully competent in their linguistic system and are completely acquainted with the communicative rules of the language. This is not the case, however, with non-natives who need to know the meanings associated with the grammatical structures. Our students are not an exception to this general principle rule; in spite of being advanced learners of English, they show an imperfect mastery of English from an instrumental or use perspective, that is, their grammar background and their acquaintance with linguistic terminology may be quite solid but they find basic problems when they have to communicate in English in writing and, more particularly, in speaking. Although the Spanish university curriculum of English Philology makes a clear-cut division between language and descriptive grammar courses, namely, *Lengua inglesa* vs. *Gramática inglesa*, this distinction is quite blurred; at times the objectives of the two types of subjects coincide and it is difficult to draw the limits for each of them. In theory, language courses are conceived to develop undergraduates' written and spoken skills whereas grammar subjects aim at making students' reflect upon how the language works. In a way our students are supposed to behave as native speakers. This is really a false assumption because their interlanguage is quite far from the status of the target language.

The objective of this paper is to survey students' views on grammar teaching and learning. It is important to know learners' opinions on their learning as the latter can throw light on the teaching process. Furthermore, the results of this exploratory study will be the starting-point for future approaches to grammar teaching which will be based on discovery learning and language awareness activities.

The first part of this work starts by briefly considering the role and importance of grammar in language teaching. A succinct revision of general approaches to grammar teaching is followed with special attention to the consciousness-raising perspective. It then gives an account of a survey of the views of a group of English Philology students on grammar teaching. The paper concludes with a discussion of what appears to be the most important issues arising from the survey.

1. The importance and role of grammar in the teaching and learning of a foreign language

Very few scholars cast doubts on the important role played by grammar in the learning of a second language; Krashen (1982) and Prabhu (1987) can be considered as an exception to the rule. However, applied linguists and educationalists (Harmer, 1987;

Rutherford, 1987; Ur, 1988; Chalker, 1994), language teachers (Palacios, 1994; Williams, 1994; Pérez Martín, 1995) and learners (Horwitz, 1988; Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Castro, 1992; Ruin, 1996), all of them, acknowledge its relevance for the study of languages. More discrepancies are perceived in the way it should be taught and how it should be integrated with all the other components of a language course. Pérez Martín (1995: 328) explains this issue claiming that “no one seriously interested in the development of second language has ever suggested that learners do not need to master the grammatical system of the target language: the debate has been over how the learner can best acquire the target grammar”. In the last few decades there has been, however, a radical change in perspective. If in the first half of the twentieth century the study of grammar was completely justified because it was believed that by learning grammar learners would be fully competent in the target language, from the 1980s onwards, grammar has been seen as a resource or medium to attain communicative competence. It is generally contended that grammar should not be studied as an end in itself but as an instrument to learn language (Rutherford, 1987; Palacios, 1999).

2. General approaches to the teaching of grammar

Two main general approaches are distinguished: explicit vs. implicit. Explicit teaching of grammar implies the formal presentation of language facts; rules are followed, in many cases, by contextualised practice. “Traditional grammar instruction is based on the assumption that explicit, conscious knowledge can become implicit, automatized knowledge through practice” (Ruin, 1996: 104). In contrast, implicit instruction of grammar makes students aware of the nature of language and of how language works; the student learns how to make sense of the linguistic system. These implicit approaches to grammar teaching are generally identified with grammar awareness methodologies or consciousness-raising pedagogical perspectives (C-R).

Taking this as general background, my professional experience over the years has shown that explicit approaches on their own are not fully effective. The explanation or presentation of grammatical rules and information together with grammar practice, even if this is contextualized or meaningful, do not necessarily lead to acquisition, especially in a foreign language environment as is the case of the learning of English in Spain. Students acquire chunks of language for some time but these structures and patterns are not cognitively assimilated and are not fully incorporated into their communicative competence. This explains why the knowledge of grammar may not be enough for a precise and adequate use of language.

Ellis (1992: 232) draws a similar contrast between what he calls ‘practice’ and ‘consciousness-raising’, claiming that “practice may not be as effective as is generally believed”; furthermore, some lines down he concludes that “practice may have limited *psycholinguistic* validity”. The practice approach is based on the idea that students progressively learn an accumulation of language units. Rutherford (1987: 5), on his part, refers to this issue as “the problem with ‘accumulated issues’” and explains it as follows:

The conception of increasing language proficiency as a development reflected in the steady accumulation of more and more complex language entities is a difficult one to maintain once one looks a little more closely at what language learners actually do in the course of their learning.

Moreover by simply exposing students to the target language, even if the input received is sufficiently comprehensible, what Krashen (1982) calls ‘comprehensible

input', acquisition is not obtained either. This means that we have to look for alternative ways for grammar teaching in which the learner really takes up an active role, becomes the protagonist of the learning process and this process may be cognitively relevant. In this sense, I consider that grammatical C-R offers new insights and for the time being, at least in my case, provides promising results.

In spite of the previous statement, some of the literature reviewed shows that the findings obtained on the superiority of implicit approaches to grammar teaching over explicit are not conclusive. Different scholars have come to differing and at times controversial results. Pica (1984), for example, shows that some grammatical items are more teachable than others. Thus the learning of the English indefinite article is not promoted by explicit teaching; in contrast, the learning of the third person *-s* of the simple present is. Pica reaches the conclusion that some forms are inherently more teachable than others. Moreover, van Baalen (1983) also found that the less complex forms can also be taught by formal teaching with explanation. However, this is not the case with more complex structures. Finally, Zhou (1991) reached similar findings with Chinese children learning passive structures.

3. The consciousness-raising (C-R) approach to grammar

This approach to grammar teaching has been referred to in the literature in different ways, 'language awareness' (LA), 'noticing', 'consciousness-raising', 'focused attention on a specific linguistic feature', etc; however, the terms 'language awareness' and 'consciousness-raising' are the most widely used and they all suggest "explicit knowledge about the language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use" (Scott, 2001: 23). Rutherford (1988: 107) defines it as "the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language".

According to Willis and Willis (1994), the origin of C-R goes back to Krashen's work although Sharwood Smith (1981) and Rutherford (1987) are key figures in its development; more recently, several other scholars, such as Ellis (1992) and James (1994), have also made important contributions to the field. In the C-R approach, students are asked to respond to language by noticing particular features of grammar and by coming to conclusions that can help them organise their perception of language. It is a discovery learning method as learners observe linguistic data, test hypotheses and reach conclusions. Ellis (1992: 234) distinguishes five stages in the development of C-R activities: a) the isolation of a specific linguistic aspect for close attention; b) the presentation of data which may illustrate the point we intend to teach. In this sense, the information presented should be closely related to common use, that is, it should correspond to a real use of the language; and c) Learners should be engaged cognitively in their learning, in other words, they should state hypotheses, test them and reach conclusions; d) Further data are provided to clarify possible misunderstandings or imperfect understanding of the grammatical structure; and, finally, e) Learners may be asked to come up with the rule that regulated the given grammatical structure.

Apart from being a self-discovering methodology, as mentioned above, it is also problem solving: students are encouraged and guided to make sense of certain grammatical figures and data presented to them. Apart from this, at an advanced level as the one we are here dealing with, students may also be initiated into linguistic research because they can be presented databases and corpora that will allow them to verify hypotheses, look for specific examples of lexical phrases, collocations, metaphors,

grammatical patterns and even explore features of text structure, such as cohesive devices, coherence elements, discourse markers, etc.

The data-driven learning approach (DDL), proposed by Tribble and Jones (1990), and Granger and Tribble (1998) among others, can be regarded as an extension of the C-R perspective through which students are made aware of how language works with data provided by the use of the so-called new technological tools in language study: word concordances, grammar and style checkers, corpus analysis and text retrieval programs, taggers and parsers, lexical frequency software and word counting packages. It could be said that the DDL utilizes the doctrine of the C-R philosophy through the use of native and learner corpora together with new computational devices. I believe that the use of data extracted from learner corpora could help especially advanced students to discern differences of use between native and non native language use. In this way, learner data could be a very useful consciousness- raising tool. Along the same lines, James (1994: 209) claims that “what we really need is text produced by learners alongside parallel text produced by natives, these being used in tandem with similar paired and juxtaposed grammars of NL and FL. We want it, and I suggest that learners want it too. Learners want some sort of bridge linking NL and FL- an interface, if you like.”

The activities that can be used for this purpose are suggested by Willis and Willis (1994: 89) and they include a wide variety of formats, from the identification of a particular pattern or usage to the explanation of similar patterns in English and in other languages, and the formulation of hypotheses on how language works.

The experimentation carried out with my students is grounded on the principles of both trends in grammar teaching. It tries to combine an implicit approach to grammar teaching by taking profit of what corpus and computational linguistics offer with the use of recent technologies. Moreover, it is based on cognitive and form-focused language acquisition theories that go from the familiar to the unfamiliar and that try to construct meaning considering what learners already know. Finally, from a language pedagogy perspective the approach adopted is inspired on learner-centred methodologies (Nunan, 1988) where the student is encouraged to discover new grammatical facts and grammar is presented as an array of little problems to be solved with the teacher’s guidance.

4. The Study

4.1. Objectives

As explained above, the main purpose of this study was the experimentation of new methods in the teaching of grammar by adopting an implicit approach which was based on the use of C-R and DDL activities through the use of new technological tools and instruments, such as general and learner corpora, concordances, word search engines, word counting and frequency programmes. Moreover, I was also interested in finding out students’ attitudes and preferences for grammar teaching as it is important to find out their subjective needs in order to incorporate them in course design and planning (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986). As mentioned, we believed it was necessary to involve our students more closely in our own teaching of grammar.

4.2. Method

4.2.1. Participants

A total of 48 fifth-year English Philology students from the University of Santiago participated in the survey. Their age ranged from 21 to 24 and most of them were female. Their proficiency level was advanced as they had already completed several language and grammar courses. Furthermore, a high number of them had also spent

periods of time in an English-speaking country, either as exchange Socrates Erasmus students or on their own. The participants were all volunteers who were informed about the objectives of the study from the very beginning. Although the sample of subjects selected cannot be regarded as representative of advanced students of English, either in terms of size or characteristics, since it is formed by a limited number of subjects within a particular context (the Department of English at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain); the results, however, will definitely show a particular direction. This tendency could be easily extrapolated to other academic environments and will contribute to the discussion on what are considered as the most effective approaches to the teaching of the grammar of a language.

4.2.2. Materials

Two main instruments were used: a worksheet (see appendix 1) and a questionnaire (see appendix 2). The worksheet was divided into two main parts. Each section included a number of tasks for the students to complete, either individually or in pairs. Part 1 of the worksheet was concerned with the use of web search engines (*Google, Altavista, Yahoo*) as language teaching and learning tools. Students were encouraged to find the meanings and examples of use of some new and unknown words to them which had been previously selected, such as *PDA, thingy, gardenburger, popup* and *metrosexual*. In the second activity of this first part and after briefing them on the notion of lexical collocation by presenting on a table particular examples and main types, learners were asked to explore the implications of this concept by finding in the Web, and with the help of the previous search engines, possible collocations for a number of items: *everlasting, exclusive, fateful, groomed* and *appalling*. The second section of this worksheet focused on the exploitation of language corpora by firstly giving them an explanation of the notion of *corpus* and secondly by providing a simple demonstration of the type of queries and investigations that could be conducted with instruments of this nature. For this purpose, small samples extracted from the ICE (International Corpus of English) and the BNC (British National Corpus) were employed. Students were also initiated into the use of learner corpora by making them familiar with the main features of the ICLE (International Corpus of Learner English) and SULEC (Santiago University Learner of English Corpus).

The questionnaire was also organised in two main subdivisions. The first one contained 7 open questions. Students were asked to provide their own definition of grammar and state their views on the grammatical areas of English which were considered to be the most interesting and most difficult for them. In this section subjects were also questioned on the general organisation of the grammar courses within the general structure of the English Philology degree, which included an assessment of their objectives, contents, and strengths and weaknesses. In the second section of this survey, students had to rate a list of 15 different statements on a scale from 1 to 5 according to their degree of agreement or disagreement. These items included questions connected with the role and function of grammar in language teaching, usefulness of teachers' explanations for the learning of grammar, importance of contextualized practice, role of grammar rules, relevance of grammatical terminology and bibliographical references, value of practical exercises and utility of contrastive analysis between English and Spanish/Galician and sentence parsing. Apart from these, there were three specific questions asking them on their preferred approach to grammar, whether explicit or implicit, and the value given to discovering and DDL activities, taking as examples the tasks included in the previous worksheet.

The whole process was completed with a general discussion with the students on some of the issues included in the questionnaire and which, according to the results obtained, demanded further elaboration.

4.2.3 Procedures

It was my main intention to fit the experiment within the usual classroom activities so as not to introduce important changes in the course syllabus and not to alter the regular teaching. The students first completed the tasks in the computer laboratory as it was necessary to use the Internet. Two sessions of one hour each were devoted to this. They answered the questionnaires in their own time and returned them anonymously. The whole process was followed by a general discussion to clarify or expand specific issues. A preliminary piloting of the research instruments was also conducted with a small number of individuals. This served to see whether the wording of the questions was clear and the completion of the tasks was feasible. Minor changes were introduced in the original plan as a result of this process.

The actual collection of the data was carried out in two different phases. The first one took place in the first term of the 2004-2005 academic year. A second collection was completed under similar conditions exactly one year later. The results obtained in the second collection were very similar to those found for the previous year.

4.3 Analysis and discussion of results

Question 1: What does the grammar of a language mean to you?

As regards the subjects' own definition of grammar, I clearly perceive a sharp contrast between prescriptive and descriptive characterizations. Some students define grammar as a number of rules that allow speakers to use the language, that is, they identify grammar with the general and formal organisation of language. In contrast, a large group of learners underline its functional character: "Grammar is present in the use of language. This means that the study of grammar should be connected with the real use of language". Along these lines, another individual adds that "grammar is basic to obtain a good knowledge of the target language". Finally, some other respondents opt for more traditional definitions, those typically found in most reference grammars and textbooks. Thus grammar is depicted as the internal study of language together with the combination of its elements; it is even characterised as the branch of Linguistics that focuses on the study of the form of language and its syntactic structures.

From the descriptions just reviewed, students' emphasis on the functional nature of grammar should be noted. Learners are not so highly concerned with grammatical theories but with the relevance of the grammatical description for the practical use of language. From the above, it is also evident that the learners questioned are more sympathetic towards functional approaches than they are towards formal approaches. They understand the study of grammar as an instrument to use language effectively and correctly.

Question 2: What aspect of the English grammar is the most interesting and attractive for you?

Apparently there is almost full agreement on this question as the majority of respondents maintain that lexis and syntax are their preferred areas of study. The fact that these students were following a course on general syntax when the experiment was being carried out may have conditioned their replies. In spite of this, it is quite

surprising that none of them referred to other grammatical levels or areas, such as text/discourse analysis, morphology, and phonetics and phonology.

Question 3: What aspect of the English grammar is the most difficult for you?

The answers obtained for this question do not greatly differ from what was expected. The combination of verbs and/or prepositions, that is, the so-called multiword or phrasal verbs are mentioned on several occasions. The learning of specialised terminology also poses serious problems for some of these students as they claim that the same concept could have different interpretations and meanings according to the linguistic paradigm adopted. Finally, two of the subjects questioned refer more particularly to logico-semantic sentence connections as a problematic issue. By this, they mean the notions of expansion (elaboration, clarification, extension) and projection (locution, idea) in the hallidayan tradition (Halliday, 1985). The study of this point as part of their course syllabus may have directly affected the subjects' replies.

Questions 4, 5, 6 and 7: Evaluation of the grammar courses and the organisation of grammar teaching in the English Philology curriculum.

Broadly speaking, students' evaluation of grammar courses is quite positive. They feel that the contents for each of the courses are clearly established and well organised with a good statement of objectives that are usually fulfilled. They also point out that there is a reasonable balance between theory and practice. Furthermore, they maintain that when they complete the four grammar courses, they obtain a global overview of the different levels of the English grammar. In contrast with the preceding opinions, learners surveyed also make some interesting critical remarks. About half of them argue that there should be a comprehensive compulsory grammar course for all students and the remaining three should be optional so that those students who want to specialise in this area could do so. In addition, a small group of them share the opinion that these courses should be longer in duration as a four-month period is not enough to have sufficient practice and to be in a position to reflect upon such complex issues. Finally, the vast majority of them state that teachers adopt different approaches to language in keeping with their own views of grammatical theory. Consequently, this leads to misunderstanding and confusion; students sometimes feel at a loss as the same terms may be used to refer to several concepts and the perspectives taken to account for some grammatical phenomena may be completely different. From this it follows that more coordination among the teachers responsible for grammar and language courses is required.

The fifteen items included in the second part of the questionnaire can be easily divided into two sections. The first four statements constitute the first and they are mainly concerned with students' attitudes towards the importance and value of grammar for an accurate written and spoken use of language. The other nine affirmations concentrate on students' positions on the pedagogy of grammar; these include instructional approaches (explicit vs. implicit) and activities and techniques for its teaching and presentation: teacher's explanations, contrastive analysis between the L1 and the L2, use of rules, contextualised practice, discovery learning tasks, practical exercises, study of terminology, readings on the grammar issues in question and sentence parsing.

Table 1 below reveals that the students surveyed consider grammar important in their language learning process since the average obtained for this particular point is

4.4 on a scale from 1 to 5. This is in accordance with previous findings of former studies (Palacios, 1994; Ruin, 1996). Striking is the apparent contradiction existing between the results found for the second statement and the following two, which are in fact expanded versions of the latter. On the one hand, there is consensus on the fact that grammar is a requirement for a correct use of English; on the other, however, the same subjects sustain that it is perfectly possible to speak and write good English without mastering the grammar of the target language. It may be the case that when referring to writing and speaking these learners mean being able to communicate effectively rather than expressing themselves with accuracy in writing and speech. This unclear point was taken up later on in the general discussion; some students justified their position maintaining that it was necessary to have a good knowledge of grammar rules to be able to speak and write well although their acquaintance with grammatical theory did not guarantee correct usage. This finding confirms learners' preferences for functional over formal approaches to language, as reported above. This means that the large majority of them are more interested in being able to use language effectively than in exploring grammatical theory and reflecting upon the language system.

Table 1: Importance students give to grammar in their learning of English

ITEM	X
Importance given to grammar in the study of English	4.4
Knowledge of grammar as a requirement for a correct use of language	4.2
Possibility of speaking English well without knowledge of grammar	2.5
Possibility of writing English well without knowledge of grammar	2.1

As regards the second set of questions, that is, those concerned with different techniques and activities for the presentation and teaching of grammar, Table 2 below shows that practical exercises and syntactic parsing are useful instruments for their understanding of the language system. They are both rated with the highest values (4.5) on a scale where, as stated above, the top value is 5. These two are followed by teacher's explanations: the respondents really see value in the presentation of grammar made by their teachers. Self-discovering activities and tasks requiring the support of new technologies, such as the Internet and the exploration of general and learner corpora, follow on the scale in terms of usefulness. Students' answers and class observation reveal learners' deep involvement in these self-directed activities, although students refer to the teacher right away when they confront any minor problem. This may be justified by the fact that students in the Spanish university system are not really used to working autonomously. They assume they will be formally guided by the teacher and they experience confusion and lack of orientation when they have to take decisions on their own. No doubt, changing students' beliefs in their work habits and in their general attitudes to the processes of teaching and learning will not be easy but this does not mean that it may not be possible. Furthermore, the high value given to discovery learning activities contrasts with learners' more positive views on the explicit approach to grammar over the implicit. The latter is rated with the lowest figure (2.8) of all the items included in this part of the questionnaire and the same is true for the reading of bibliographical references on the grammatical issues being discussed. The

latter figures clearly denote that the students once again prefer being led by the teacher rather than finding new things by themselves and working and practising on their own.

Table 2: Students' views on the value of different techniques and activities for the presentation and teaching of grammar

TECHNIQUES AND ACTIVITIES FOR GRAMMAR TEACHING	X
Usefulness of teacher's explanations in the study of grammar	4.1
Teaching of grammar should be made implicitly rather than explicitly	2.8
Usefulness of contrastive analysis English vs. Spanish/Galician for the study of grammar	3.2
Usefulness of contextualized practice for the learning of grammar	3.7
Importance of rules in the study of grammar	3.6
Effectiveness of self-discovering activities	3.8
Importance of practical exercises	4.5
Importance of terminology	3.6
The reading of bibliographical references helps in the understanding of grammar	2.8
Usefulness of syntactic parsing	4.5
Usefulness of activities based on use of the Internet, and general and learner corpora	4.1

Moreover, students do not seem to be very fond of contrastive analysis across languages. When this item was included in the survey, it was thought that they would assess it in positive terms since they are advanced students of English with a linguistic academic background. Most of them are bilingual Galician/Spanish and they can speak and understand other foreign languages. This hypothesis, however, was not verified. Terminology and rules both obtain a similar value (3.6) and although they are closer to the positive end than to the negative, this tendency cannot be regarded as clearly marked. Contextualized practice is rated slightly higher than rules and terminology but much lower than practical exercises (3.7).

5. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

In this section I will go from the most general to the most specific. A number of considerations for further study will follow.

- Research projects like this one serve to establish a link between linguistic and general pedagogical theory with grammar and teaching practice. Furthermore, there is a need for investigation of this nature which can help us to understand and give a reply to some of the problems we face both as teachers and researchers in our daily practice in the classroom; there is no doubt that grammar teaching occupies a central position in this respect.

- It is important to survey students' attitudes and views on our teaching practice with a view to introducing in our programmes and courses the necessary changes to suit learners' objective and subjective lacks and needs. This does not imply that our teaching should be directly and exclusively conditioned by students' learning preferences but the latter should be at least seriously considered. Students' involvement will make them feel more responsible and more autonomous; consequently, they will be more motivated to learn.

- Grammar is definitely regarded as important by learners and as playing an important role in their study of the target language. New alternative methods to the teaching of grammar should be explored. We should aim at more learner-centred rather than teacher-fronted methodologies. In this sense students are insistent in their demands for more practice over theory and they are more highly concerned with the study of grammatical description as the basis for a fluent and accurate use of language than with the abstract analysis and exploration of grammatical theory.
- Self-directed activities where the learner observes data, tests hypotheses and comes to conclusions, seem to operate quite effectively with Spanish advanced university students of English.
- The use of new technologies, such as the Internet and working with general and learner corpora can provide a new dimension to the teaching of grammar. These instruments can become useful tools for the practice of implicit approaches to the teaching of grammar.
- Syntax appears to be the area of grammar mostly preferred. Without questioning its importance, we should not disregard the other levels of language, such as lexis, semantics, text analysis, phonetics and phonology.
- Students' general assessment of the organization of grammar courses in the English Philology curriculum of the University of Santiago is quite positive, although the time allocated for these seminars is perceived as rather short. Coordination of teachers is also considered necessary.
- The presentation of grammatical terminology should be made more attractive as students are quite dubious about its relevance. It will be necessary to underline this point since being acquainted with labels commonly used in linguistic descriptions may be fundamental for a good understanding of specialised literature. It is essential to bear in mind that in the near future some of these learners may devote themselves to research in the field of Linguistics as postgraduates in English Studies.
- In both the short and long term, students should be made more autonomous. No doubt, autonomy is one of the main and ultimate objectives in any educational programme and grammar teaching should not be an exception. Once again, new technologies could lead the way in this respect.

The results obtained in the study should be regarded as totally preliminary since the sample of subjects selected was quite limited and was focused on a particular teaching context at a Spanish university. Moreover, the time span in which the investigation took place was also brief in order to come to final conclusions. Therefore it will be necessary to conduct new long-term projects in the years to come in order to explore the effectiveness of implicit approaches to grammar grounded on the use of self-discovery learning tasks and new technological tools with students of different levels of English. It will be interesting to contrast the effects and results of these approaches with students of similar characteristics and under comparable situations.

General and learner corpora can also make important contributions to grammar teaching especially when dealing with advanced students. No doubt, this will have to be proved with data gathered from new experiences and surveys. Finally, I hope that this report will serve to promote further discussion on grammar teaching, that it will help to explore new implicit and grammar awareness perspectives and that it will open new paths for the use of language corpora in the classroom.

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Computer Lab Worksheet

1. Use of *google* as a useful linguistic tool

- a) It can be employed to find out the meaning and use of new or unknown words.

Find examples of use for the following words:

Metrosexual:

Popup:

Garden burger:

Thingy:

PDA:

Snail mail:

Could you suggest/find other new words that could be added to the previous list?

.....

- b) It can also be used to find collocations, that is, words that are commonly used together. These are some of the main types:

Verb + noun	<i>claim responsibility, press the trigger</i>
Verb + preposition	<i>depend on, persist in, arrive at, reflect on/upon</i>
Adjective + noun	<i>grim reality, plain truth</i>
Verb + adjective+ noun	<i>make steady progress</i>
Adverb + verb	<i>greatly appreciate, strongly suggest</i>
Adverb + adjective	<i>utterly amazed, completely useless, brutally beaten</i>
Adverb + adjective + noun	<i>totally unacceptable behaviour</i>
Adjective + preposition	<i>ashamed of, used to, filled with, full of</i>
Adjective + noun	<i>brown sugar, brown bag, nonstop flight</i>
Noun + noun	<i>book marker, Ash Wednesday</i>
Noun+ preposition	<i>reputation for</i>
Adjective + adjective	<i>Asian African</i>

Find collocations for the following words: *everlasting, exclusive, fateful, groomed, appalling, utterly, dismal, fatuous.*

Which collocation is more likely? *a strong car/a powerful car; strong tea/powerful tea; auburn hair/auburn carpet; a doleful party/a doleful expression; a lengthy car/a lengthy meeting.* **Check your guesses with examples from the Web.**

2. Corpus and use of corpora:

- a) English: British National Corpus (BNC), International Corpus of English (ICE), Bank of English, Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT), The Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES).
- b) Spanish: *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA), *Corpus Lingüístico del Español Contemporáneo* (CUMBRE)
- c) Galician: *Corpus de Galego Actual* (CORGA).
- d) Learner corpora: International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), Santiago University Learner of English Corpus (SULEC), Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC), The Longman Learners' Corpus (LLeC).

BNC demo website: <http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html>

Task 1

Investigate the use of the verb *help* in constructions of the type *help* + object + infinitive. The question here is to know whether the verb *help* takes the infinitive with *to* or the bare infinitive form, i.e. *Helping learners to learn* vs. *helping learners learn* or *Helping you to do it* vs. *helping you do it*.

Task 2

The notion of ergativity. Find particular examples of use of ergative verbs: *bounce, ripen, widen, heal, grow, change, darken.*

Which use is more common, the ergative or the non-ergative one?

Task 3

Find at least 5 different senses for the words *flat* and *aggregate*.

Task 4

Get into SULEC (Santiago University Learner of English Corpus) and test out the use of some false friends by the corpus learners. Here is a list of some terms you can have as reference: *actually, sensible, sensitive, crime, exit, fabric, molest, sane, complexion, corpulent, consistent, arrange, gracious.* Can you add any other to the previous list?

Introduction

This questionnaire is totally anonymous and forms part of a research project about the role of grammar and its teaching. The main aim is to get to know your attitudes and opinions about this question. Honesty is appreciated.

Answer the following questions in the space provided:

1. What does the grammar of a language mean to you?

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2. What aspect or area of English grammar is the most attractive and interesting for you? If possible, justify your response.

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3. What part of English grammar is the most difficult for you?

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.....

4. How do you think the different courses of English grammar (*Introducción, Gramática 1, Gramática 2, Gramática 3*) are organised in the present curriculum of English Philology of this university? What aspects would you change?

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5. Do you think that the **objectives** of the English grammar courses are well defined?

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6. Do you consider the **contents** of the English grammar courses as the most adequate? What changes would you make?

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.....

7. Please indicate three (3) positive and three (3) negative aspects of the English grammar lessons in this year. If you cannot think of any, you can leave it blank.

Positive	Negative

This section of the questionnaire is formed by statements that must be rated on a scale that goes from 1 to 5, in which

5	means	fully agree
4	”	agree
3	”	neither agree nor disagree
2	”	disagree
1	”	strongly disagree

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Grammar plays an important role in the study of English. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. The knowledge of grammar is indispensable for a correct use of the language. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. It is possible to speak English well without any grammatical knowledge. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. It is possible to write English well without any grammatical knowledge. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. Teacher’s explanations are in general useful for the study of grammar.. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. The teaching of grammar must be done implicitly rather explicitly. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. Contrastive analysis of English with Galician/Spanish is useful in the study of grammar. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. Contextualised grammar practice is relevant in the learning of English grammar | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. Rules are important in the study of English grammar. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. Those activities in which one discovers grammatical phenomena are truly effective. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11. Practical exercises are important in the study of English grammar. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 12. The study of terminology is important in the learning of English grammar. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 13. Reading bibliography about English grammar helps immensely in understanding it. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 14. Syntactic analysis of phrases and sentences helps immensely to better understand English grammar. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 15. Practical exercise like the ones we did in the computer lab in which new technologies (the Internet) and corpora were used are useful and interesting. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Thanks a lot for your cooperation. If there is anything else you would like to add, you can do it below.

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