

# Grammar Study in Foreign Language Teaching

## The Place of Grammar in a Sequence of Spanish Classes

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### Abstract

The purpose of the present research is to analyze whether the place and amount of grammar explanation and practice are appropriate for accurate production in a Spanish as a Foreign Language class at the beginner level. Studying grammar involves learning the way a language manipulates and combines words so as to form longer units of meaning. This leads to the following questions : How much grammar study and practice do students need to be able to produce accurate utterances? Regarding lesson planning, what is the appropriate place and amount of grammar within a lesson? This work contains a description and analysis of the insertion of grammar in a sequence of class components and also teacher/student responses in order to determine how effective the grammar lessons are in terms of the amount of grammar input and its place within the class to foster students' accurate use of grammar in communicative activities.

現在の研究の目的は、外国語としての初級者スペイン語クラスにおいて、文法の説明および練習の位置と量が正確な生産に適切かどうかを分析することである。文法の学習では、ある言語が単語を操り、組み合わせることによって、意味を持つより長い構成単位を作る方法を習得する。これは以下のような疑問を生じさせる。すなわち、学習者が正確に発話できるようになるには、文法をどれぐらい学習・練習する必要がある

のか。授業計画については、一回の授業で文法を学習させる適切な位置と量はどうか。この研究では、コミュニケーション・アクティビティで学習者に文法構造を正確に使わせるうえで、授業における文法インプットの量と位置の点で、文法の授業がどの程度有効かを見極めるため、授業の一連の要素のなかに挿入する文法と、教師と学生の反応を記述、分析する。

### Introduction : grammar in language teaching and learning

The study of grammar has had a long and outstanding role in the development of theories about foreign language teaching and learning. For centuries, to learn an L2 meant to know the grammatical structures of that language and to remember the rules for its use. Grammar used to be considered such an essential feature of language learning that teaching it was also thought to be enough for learners to actually acquire another language. The central role of grammar in language teaching remained almost unquestioned until the late twentieth century and even a few decades ago it was hard to imagine language instruction without immediately thinking of grammar.

However, grammar pedagogy has been the source of much debate. For example, some language educators have argued that foreign languages are best learned deductively, where students are asked

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to memorize and recite definitions, rules, examples and exceptions. Other language educators have maintained that language learning is best achieved inductively. In this approach students are presented with examples of the target language and led to discover the underlying organizational principles. Even more traditional teachers have claimed that the best way to learn an L2 is to study its grammar so that the language could be translated from one language to another (Purpura, 2004).

In the late twentieth century, the central role of grammar in L2 teaching started to be questioned and some language teachers started to insist that the grammar should not only be learned but also applied to communicative purposes. Some other teachers, made even stronger attempts to de-emphasize the role of grammar in language teaching, believing that foreign languages are best learned in the same way that children learn their native language, through constant exposure to the language and through natural interaction (Purpura, 2004 ; Thornbury, 2005).

The author of the present article views the learning of a foreign language as the acquisition of “communicative competence” rather than “linguistic competence”, that is use of language and language in action rather than language as a system of symbols, ability and command rather than static knowledge. However, this article maintains the need for accuracy and the insertion of grammar practice in class. It consists of two parts : the first part contains a reference to the relation between grammar and communication, a description of class planning, particularly a sequence of activities and an account of techniques for teaching grammar, teacher’s class journals, and student responses in tests, dialogues, questionnaires and interviews. The second part contains an analysis of class planning-sequence and teacher-student response in order to determine how effective the classes are in terms of students’

accurate application of grammar structures in communicative activities, i.e. whether the amount of grammar input received by learners and the place of such input within the class were appropriate to foster student production of accurate structures.

This article refers to classes of Spanish for beginners consisting of Engineering, Law and Economics students : two classes with a total of 62 students in 2008 and two classes with a total of 70 students in 2009. These students take two classes of Spanish as a second foreign language weekly. The two set purposes for the class are the following : a) the students should be able to produce a 6-8 minute conversation at the end of the first semester and a 9-12 minute conversation at the end of the second semester ; b) the students should understand and produce a basic sentence in Spanish, with Subject-Verb-Object, and some variations. The present article aims to determine whether the amount of grammar study and its place in the class are appropriate.

## I. Grammar : concept and place

### *Grammar and communication*

Thornbury (2005) maintains the concept of grammar beyond a set of rules, i.e. grammar is not just a thing but it is also something people create, and criticizes the way grammar is taught in the class, equivalent to : “I, the teacher, will cut the language into lots of little pieces –called grammar- so that you, the learner, will be able to reassemble them in real communication” (p.2). What happens is that learners take those little pieces of language and still cannot produce accurate sentences because that concept considers grammar just as results and ignores the process needed to get them. So far there are two concepts related to grammar as a product, namely “grammar” as a set of rules that describe the way language functions, and “a grammar” as a book containing such rules and descriptions. What Thornbury proposes, and what this work adheres to,

is his proposal that there is a combination of grammar as product and “grammar as process”, grammar as something learners can produce and work with.

There is a set of rules that govern how units of meaning may be constructed in any language. A learner who knows grammar is one who has mastered and can apply these rules so as to express what would be considered acceptable language utterances. Grammar, in itself, may furnish the basis for a set of classroom activities during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective aiming at making learners feel confident when using the language. Therefore, the appropriate key words here are “temporarily” and “application”. This means that at an early stage students can be asked to learn a certain structure through exercises that concentrate on particular manipulations of language but should quickly progress to activities that use such structure meaningfully.

How important is grammar for the sake of communication? Let’s consider the following dialogues (Thornbury, 2005 : p. 3) :

- A. Coffee?
- B. Please.
- A. Milk? Sugar?
- B. No milk. One sugar. Thanks.
- A. Toast?
- B. No thanks.
- A. Juice?
- B. Mmm.
  
- A. Would you like some of this coffee?
- B. Yes, I would like some of this coffee, please.
- A. Do you take milk? Do you take sugar?
- B. I don’t take milk. But I will take one sugar, please.
- A. Would you like some of this toast?
- B. I’d prefer not to have any of that toast, thanks.

- A. Can I offer you some of this juice?
- B. Yes, I would like some of that juice.

In the first example, not much conventional grammar is found and the exchange operates at the lexical level. The second example is “over-grammatical” : unnecessarily wordy and even old-fashioned. It is possible to find dialogues similar to the second one in Spanish textbooks. The author of this article aims at a middle point between “just communication” and “grammatical accuracy”. Actually, communication does not depend so much on grammar ; anybody can understand if an English student says “My brother like drinking coffee”. However, why not stress the rules for verbs in the third person simple present a bit so that the student produces an accurate utterance? In the same way, anybody can understand if a Spanish student at a shop says : “Quiero la bufanda negro”. Nevertheless, why not stress a few basic rules for usage of the articles “la/el, un, una” and noun-adjective number and gender agreement so that the student can use more accurate language when he/she asks for “una bufanda negra”?

### *Class planning and the place of grammar in the sequencing*

The author considers herself within the group of teachers who, together with communication skills, requires attention to accurate production of grammatical features. This point refers to components of the class and the place of grammar within the class.

#### *1. Sequencing.*

It is the format of the class and the lesson itself. Most lessons do not consist of a single activity ; rather, the teacher analyzes the overall goals of a lesson and the content to be taught and plans a sequence of activities to attain those goals. In second

and foreign language teaching a number of principles have emerged for determining the internal structure of lessons and this work refers to how those principles are applied in grammar study :

- simple activities and those involving receptive skills should come before complex ones that involve productive skills : learners receive the new language in written texts, very short videos or listening activities. After analyzing and practicing the new items learners use them to produce something by themselves.
- students should practice using a tense or grammar structure before studying the rule that underlies it : after being presented the new language items, students practice them several times. Sometimes learners become aware of the underlying rule and other times the teacher explains it.
- the teacher makes a progression within each lesson from mechanical or form-based activities to meaningful-based activities : before free interaction-based activities learners practice the grammar points in mechanical activities with worksheets.

## 2. Components of the class.

Some of the components of language classes are the following : presentation of new vocabulary, grammar (explanation and practice), oral interaction for practicing grammar structures, listening, reading, writing, culture.

## 3. Organization of grammar teaching.

Although it is not possible to point to the “best” way to teach grammar, Ur (1988 : pp.6-10) proposes the following stages :

- a) Presentation. Present students the context in which the new grammatical structure appears so as to get the learners to perceive the structure as something new.

- b) Isolation and explanation. At this stage we move away from the context, and focus, temporarily, on the grammatical items themselves : what they sound and look like, what they mean, how they function. This works focuses on this step.
- c) Practice. This step contains exercises whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the new structures thoroughly. The function of this step is to familiarize students with the new material.
- d) Test. This step refers to some kind of feedback so as to check that students have understood and can use the new structures properly.

## 4. Structure of the grammar lesson and placement of the explanation :

- a) From the particular to the general. In this case each specific point is explained and then learners practice all of them together in a dialogue.
- b) Each particular point is explained and practiced and after each item is practiced students use all of them together.
- c) From the general to the particular. In this case learners are exposed to the whole and from there the teacher and the learners take the new items that are to be explained and practiced.

The following part offers descriptions of grammar lessons, students opinions and work (written and oral), and also teacher perception about grammar study in the class through the looking glass of journals and reports.

## II. Analysis of grammar lessons

In this part there is a description of three types of grammar lessons that learners undertake, and also student responses and teacher reflections about them.

### *Grammar lessons*

1. From the particular to the general. In this case the teacher explains each specific point (“hay” and “estar”) and then learners practice all of them

together in a dialogue (the pattern is also provided).

2. In this case the teacher explains each new item of grammar, makes the learners study and practice each of them and then learners use all of them

together in a dialogue. It means that before producing a dialogue learners have studied and practiced each grammatical item in isolation. For example, with the verb “vivir” (live) : students get to know the meaning and also the conjugation in the simple present tense. Students work in the

7. A- Dibuja un plano con los servicios más importantes de tu barrio ideal. 大切な施設や機関の位置を工夫し、君の理想とする街の図を描きなさい。

 un hospital	 un banco
 un cine	 un supermercado
 una pizzería	 una oficina de correos
 una estación de tren (de metro)	 una parada de taxis (autobús)

B- Pregúntale a tu compañero/a qué hay y dónde está cada servicio. Utiliza las expresiones del recuadro. 右の枠内の表現も参考に、どんなサービス機関や施設があるか、またそれらがどこにあるかをクラスメイトにたずねなさい。

ej.

hay

- ¿Hay un museo en tu barrio?
- Sí.
- ¿Está cerca de tu casa?
- Sí, muy cerca.
- ¿Dónde está?
- Está frente al restaurante.

estar

cerca de (近くに)  
estar + lejos de (遠くに)  
a diez minutos de (歩いて10分)

Figure 1. Grammar lesson : from particular elements to the whole.

9. Escucha el siguiente diálogo. Tradúcelo y repítelo con tu compañero/a. 次の会話を聞き、訳した後、クラスメイトと反復練習をなさい。

Soy Mariko. (Yo) Vivo en Kobe con mis padres, pero ellos son de Sendai. ¿Vives con tus padres?

Buenos días. Me llamo Masako. Soy de Fukuoka, pero ahora vivo en Kioto. ¿Y tú?

No. Vivo sola.

¿Dónde vives?

¿De dónde eres?

¿Cómo te llamas?

Figure 2. Grammar lesson : practice of each particular grammatical item before its communicative use

8.  Escucha los siguientes diálogos. ¿Tienen alguna diferencia en el trato? 次の二つの会話を聞きなさい。言葉づかいにどんな違いがありますか?



En una zapatería	En una tienda de ropas y accesorios
(靴屋さんで)	(洋服やアクセサリの店で)
	
formal and informal demonstrative adjectives demonstrative pronouns verbs: tener, haber, costar	
<p><i>La cliente</i> : ¡Buenos días! ¿Tiene zapatos de taco alto?</p> <p><i>El vendedor</i> : Sí, aquí están. Estos son todos los colores que tenemos.</p> <p><i>La cliente</i> : ¿Cuánto cuestan éstos?</p> <p><i>El vendedor</i> : Cuestan 9.500 yenes.</p> <p><i>La cliente</i> : Bien, ¿puede mostrarme los marrones, por favor?</p> <p><i>El vendedor</i> : Sí, claro.</p>	<p><i>La cliente</i> : ¡Hola! ¿Tienes bolsos de cuero?</p> <p><i>El vendedor</i> : Sí, por supuesto. Hay de varios colores.</p> <p><i>La cliente</i> : ¿Cuánto cuesta éste de cuero negro?</p> <p><i>El vendedor</i> : Cuesta 5.300 yenes.</p> <p><i>La cliente</i> : Está bien. Lo compro.</p>

Figure 3. Grammar lesson : from the whole to particular elements.

same way with all the other verbs that appear in the exercise and some other ones related to personal information (study, work, etc.) that are not shown in the exercise, and also study possessive adjectives and a few adverbs like “sola” and “solo” (alone).

3. From the general to the particular. In this case, learners are exposed to the whole, for example the dialogue in fig. 3, and from there they take the new points to be explained and studied : formal and informal treatment, colors (variations of gender and number), verbs and their conjugation, and special expressions.

*Learners' application of grammar points in dialogues*

a. Written dialogues. Students' performance in dialogues was analyzed in 30 dialogues about the topic “Shopping” written in pairs. In one class students studied the elements necessary to produce the dialogue following pattern number 3, i.e. from a complete text, learners, together with the teacher, extracted the new aspects to be

clarified and practiced. In the following class, after a general revision of rules related to noun-adjective, number and gender agreement ; appropriate verbs for shopping, formal and informal treatment, demonstrative adjective and demonstrative pronouns, a listening activity and a vocabulary activity, students produced a dialogue in pairs. The detected mistakes in writing were the following :

- Singular noun – plural verb
- Preposition (de) “of” between noun and adjective
- Gender and number agreement of demonstrative pronoun.
- Number agreement of verbs and nouns.
- Use of article, gender and number agreement of noun and adjective.
- Mistakes in meaning.
- Adjective before noun.

The most frequent mistakes in writing were the following :

- Within the same sentence : preposition (de) “of” between noun and adjective, gender and

number agreement (article, noun, adjective).

- In different sentences : gender and number agreement of a demonstrative pronoun and a previous noun (see Figure 4).

b. Oral dialogues. Students did peer correction of the dialogues they wrote. They managed to see their peers' mistakes except those related to demonstrative pronouns (gender and number agreement with nouns and verbs). Each pair looked at their corrected mistakes and reproduced the dialogue orally (without looking at their written texts). The only mistake some students still made was that related to gender and number agreement of nouns, adjectives and articles.

Regarding the desired accuracy in production, it is possible to mention two aspects : the peer and teacher check of written texts is a useful step before oral production, and it is also necessary to add brief exercises to make students practice each difficult item before a complete production.

### Students' response

Regarding the way grammar is taught and practiced in the class, students replied to a questionnaire and also some of them volunteered to be interviewed :

a. Survey : 61 students in 2008 and 61 students in 2009 replied to a questionnaire referred to the amount of grammar and its place in the class.

Students replied to the following questions : 1. 授業の短い会話をするために文法の量は適当ですか。文法テーマの勉強の仕方は適当ですか。 2. 文法の勉強はどのようなふうにやった方が良くと思いますか。

3. もっと文法ドリルをやりたいですか。 4. 文法の勉強の一番適当な時間は、授業の初め、真ん中、終わりぐらいの中のいつがいいですか。理由も教えて下さい。 5. 一番難しい文法のテーマは何ですか。 どういうふうにしてそのテーマを勉強したいですか。

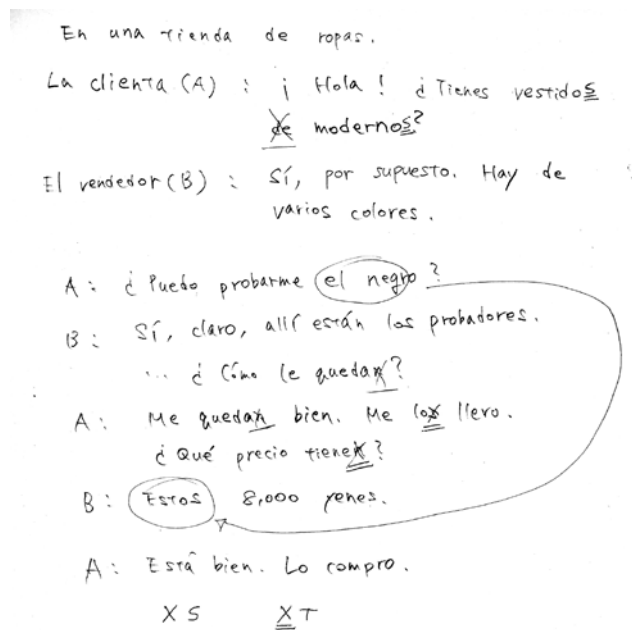


Figure 4. Dialogue written by a pair of students

### b. Interview

Students were given time to discuss and were invited to the teacher's office to comment about the results of the discussion regarding pace, placement and any other suggestions regarding the grammar lesson in the class. These are the students' comments :

Pace : it is appropriate, it would not be appropriate to be faster.

Placement : at the beginning of the class so as to have plenty of time for practice.

Quantity : appropriate.

Suggestions : explain clearly in Japanese at the beginning of the class the menu for the class, sometimes the examples in the book are difficult (more explanation is required), studying grammar is boring so to make it more fun it is better to present the whole topic (for example, a complete text) and from there derive the grammar issues, study grammar with songs.

Table 1. Synthesis of 122 students' answers to a questionnaire about grammar study

1. Is the amount of grammar enough for the small dialogues we perform in class?	Yes. 91 students Want more grammar : 31 students
2. Is the way we are studying grammar points and the strategies for practicing them appropriate for you? How would you like to study grammar?	Yes. 99. Comments : daily use, it is good to use the grammar points in conversations, easy to understand, it is good that grammar and conversation progress at the same time. No. 23. Comments : the focus of the class is conversation, grammar is not enough, want a Japanese teacher, more mechanical practice, more examples written by the students, make students write more sentences applying grammatical patterns.
3. Would you like to have more mechanical practice in grammar?	Yes. 31 No. 91
4. Sometimes we have grammar at the beginning of the class, sometimes at the end of the class, sometimes in the middle of the class. Where do you prefer grammar study?	Beginning : 88. If there is no explanation at the beginning it is not clear what we have to do, more time to practice, after a clear insight of grammar points it is easier to produce a conversation, grammar is difficult so it is better to do it at the beginning and have plenty of time to practice. Middle : 24. At the beginning and at the end it is better to have fun. It is interesting to try a conversation and then see how each grammar item works. Last part : 8. First conversation, then grammar ; grammar at the beginning is tiring, grammar like revision and synthesis, study of grammar details so as to understand the conversation. Any time : 2
5. Which is the most difficult grammar point? How would you like to practice it?	Articles, verb conjugation, new vocabulary, gender of nouns, reflexive verbs. Comments : make a comparison among English, Japanese and Spanish.

*Teacher's reflections in journals and reports*

The author wrote an account of her classes in journals and a brief description of her grammar lessons in reports.

a. Reports. A lesson report is an inventory that describes the main features of a lesson. These reports allow the teacher to monitor regularly what happened during a lesson, how much time was spent on each part of the class, and what kind of activities were done in each lesson (Richards & Lockhart, 2007 : p.9). This author designed a report form and filled it in periodically. According to the reports written during 2008 and 2009 the author is teaching grammar in the following way :

- in one class learners deal with rules of grammar, one mechanical activity and an activity that implies communicative use and in the following class there is a revision of rules before a very short mechanical activity and a longer activity based on communicative use,

- an average of 30 minutes per class,
  - grammar items are decided according to the textbook,
  - explanation of grammar rules and application of them : the teacher presents students errors, gives practice from a textbook, gives exercises designed by her, uses paper strips, makes students become teachers, fill out worksheets, and reply to oral questions,
  - when assigning students work on grammar, students practice exercises orally in class , go over each other's homework or classwork, do sentence-combining exercises, create sentences using specific grammar rules or sentence patterns, the teacher gives a brief explanation in Japanese.
- b. Journals. "The usual teaching journal is a first person account of a series of teaching experiences" (Gebhard, 2005 : p.75). The basic idea is to write regularly about teaching experiences during a



certain period of time and analyze these entries so as to find patterns and special aspects that allow us to understand our practice in the classroom. An analysis of the reports written during 2008 and 2009 shows the following :

- too much attention to certain grammatical features, for example : “of the” and “to” (“contracciones articulares *del - al*”). That topic was explained at least four times each year,
- an even more detailed explanation in Japanese might be necessary regarding the use of articles,
- the class was teacher-centered more times than expected,
- time of explanation : sometimes at the beginning of the class, so that there is plenty of time for mechanical and free practice ; sometimes at the middle of the class but in this case there is not time enough for two kinds of practice ; avoid grammar explanation at the end of the class, actually students do not remember anything and it is necessary to explain everything again in the following class.

## Discussion

The point of departure for practicing grammatical structures is to cover the need for accuracy. Even when instructing learners to perform a spontaneous and informal conversation, they will want to use accurate structures and avoid making mistakes that their peers might notice. For feeling confident about the accurate use of the target language, users will feel the need to organize clearly what they want to say, use appropriate language and structures, and check that they are correct when listening to their peers using the same structures.

From the perspective of the teacher, it is necessary to increase the practice of isolated items so as to avoid or to correct incorrect transference. Students seem to have a particular difficulty with the Spanish preposition *de* (of). Therefore, some

students used the pattern “something made of” (*bolso de cuero*) and “something with a particular characteristic” (*zapatos con/de taco alto*), to express “noun-adjective” (*bufanda larga*) wrote “*bufanda de larga*”. The mistakes made by students in the production of written texts and oral dialogues are not serious enough to hinder communication or intelligibility. However, since one of the goals of the syllabus is “to understand and produce accurate utterances” this author thinks it is worth stressing the precise production of structures. For that reason, it is worthwhile including further practice of individual grammar points between the stage of written production and communication stage.

Student opinions will be taken into consideration and grammar study and practice will be done more deductively ; thus, learners will receive the whole and from there, together with the teacher, will derive the specific items to be studied. This aspect should be carefully considered at the time of planning the structure of each lesson and deciding the place for grammar study and practice. In fact, one important point of this article is the re-confirmation that most of the students in the four classes considered prefer to study grammar at the beginning of the class so as to feel more confident when using the new structures in a conversation. Therefore, the sequence to be used should contain, firstly, accuracy-based activities that focus on structures, functions and vocabulary ; and then fluency-based activities which focus on interaction and exchange of information.

## Conclusion

This article emphasized the importance of producing accurate utterances and stressed the search for a point between accuracy and natural communication. At the beginning of the article, we mentioned two key-words : “temporarily” and “application”. The first one refers to the process of acquisition and practice of the new structures, the

process of isolation and explanation (Ur, 1988 : pp.6-10), before using them. Regarding the process, according to student answers, it is appropriate in terms of pace and quantity of information. Besides this, it is advisable to set such a process at the beginning of the class. It was tried at different moments of the lesson : at the end so as to practice the following class, but students did not remember the main points and it was necessary to explain again ; at the middle of the class, but in this case there was not enough time for two kinds of practice. It is necessary to focus on the new forms and practice them before using them in a communicative situation. The next step is to devise a proper variety of activities to focus on grammar forms and details.

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