

First-language grammar in the classroom: from consciousness raising to learner autonomy

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According to students grammar lessons are boring and tedious. If you ask them why they will tell you that almost all they do in grammar lessons is to study and to practice 'rules' (see Micallef 1995). When asked how they feel about learning 'grammar', Form 3 students at a Junieur Lyceum stated that grammar "*...tad-dwejjaq, fiha qabda regoli, u li fiha ma nifmu xejn. Kollox trid tistudja bl-amment għall-eżami*" (it is tedious, full of rules that we do not understand. Everything has to be studied for the exam). When asked why they think they should learn grammar they replied that without it "*ma niktub Malti tajeb u importanti għax tkun fl-eżam!*" (we cannot write Maltese correctly, and it is important for the exam). Form 1 students were also asked to give their opinion about grammar and grammar lessons. They think that they need to study grammar "*biex nispellu tajeb*" (to spell correctly); and that grammar is "*dik li toqgħod tagħmel ħafna jien, int, huwa, hija. Konna ndumu nimlew pages fil-Year 6 biex għamilna tal-Junior!*" (full of conjugations. We used to fill pages of them when we were preparing to sit for the 11+ examination). Little do they know that as native speakers they make constant use of grammar in their everyday communication!

Whilst talking no one ever really thinks about the linguistic components he/she is making use of, or about the grammatical system which makes communication possible. Every individual born with the faculties of thought and speech continuously and unconsciously resorts to his/her native speaker knowledge of language in the course of daily business.

Only after we understand the nature of language, and hence the nature of grammar, can we attempt to change the quality of language teaching in general, and of pedagogical grammar in particular. One of our main criticisms of the currently-available syllabus and accompanying textbooks for the teaching of L1 grammar in Maltese schools, is that they emanate from a mistaken understanding of native speaker knowledge and, therefore, of what first-language education ought to be about. For instance, the grammar section of the syllabus puts great emphasis on the

Semitic structures of Maltese, and leaves very little room for up-dated synchronic descriptions. The kind of learning that is expected to take place, furthermore, is more fit for a second-language learning environment than for the teaching of Maltese as a native tongue.

Maltese students, with Maltese as a first language, already come to the classroom equipped with a substantial linguistic baggage. Of course, in our society, much is expected from the school as far as literacy goes: "the children go to school to learn to read and write", is what parents generally think. On the other hand, children do not go to school to learn L1 grammar. They already know it. Even before coming to school they can already understand and produce an infinite number of grammatically correct and original sentences in Maltese. To illustrate the theoretical backbone of our argument we will pursue the Chomskyan elucidation in the theory of universal grammar (UG).

UG is defined as "the language faculty built-in to the human mind consisting of principles and parameters" (see Cook 1991). Principles of language are those aspects of human language present in all human minds, such as the principle of structure dependency. Let us use the following example as an illustration of this principle. Look at the following sentences in English.

1. Mary has hurt herself.
2. Has Mary hurt herself?

The first sentence is a statement. The second sentence is a question. In order to turn the statement (sentence 1) into a question (sentence 2), the speaker unconsciously follows the instruction: "Start from the sentence 'Mary has hurt herself' and move the second word 'has' to the beginning". While this instruction produces a correct question as in sentence 2, it does not work in the following example.

3. The man who has run away shouting was attacked by a wasp.

- *4. Has the man who run away shouting was attacked by a wasp?

Sentence 4 is incorrect. It is ungrammatical in English. In sentences 3 and 4 we cannot follow the same instruction for sentences 1 and 2 "Start from the sentence 'The man who has run away shouting was attacked by a wasp' and move the fourth word 'has' to the beginning". The speaker needs to know enough about the structure of sentences to be able to distinguish between the structure of sentences 1 and 3. Inversion questions in English, and indeed in all other languages, involve a knowledge of structure, not just of the order of the words. Structure-dependency is one of the language principles built-in to the human mind.

Such principles common to all human language are necessary to enable speakers of language X to learn language Y. In fact, principles of structure-dependency apply also to interlanguages¹. Indeed, no-one has yet found sentences produced by second language learners that breach the known language principles such as structure-dependency (Cook 1991:23).

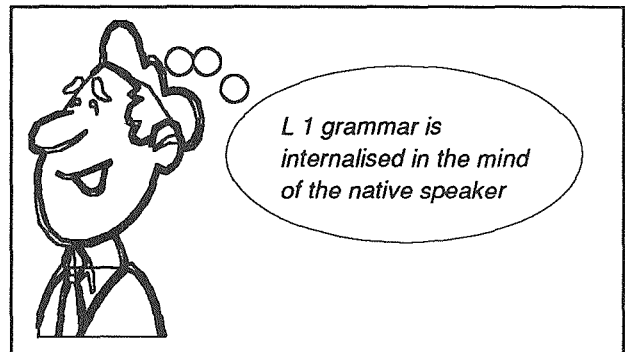
Language parameters, on the other hand, are those aspects that vary from one language to another within tightly-set limits, such as the pro-drop parameter. Parameters are set in a child's mind during the early years of infancy, and they are what makes the learning of second, third and foreign languages difficult. The pro-drop parameter refers to the presence or absence of the grammatical subject in a declarative sentence of a particular language. Look at the following examples.

5. *English*: She works in Berlin.
6. *German*: Sie arbeitet in Berlin.
7. *Italian*: (Lei) lavora a Berlino.
8. *Maltese*: (Hi) taħdem Berlin.

English and German demand the presence of the grammatical subject like 'she' and 'sie' in sentences 5 and 6 above. Italian and Maltese, on the other hand, allow the pronouns 'lei' and 'hi' as in sentences 7 and 8, that stand for the grammatical subject, to be dropped. The pro-drop parameter variation has effects on the grammars of all languages; each of them is either pro-drop or non-pro-drop (Cook 1991:24).

Thus, all human minds are believed to possess the same language principles, but different parameter settings. Learners do not need to learn structure-dependency because their minds automatically provide it for any language they meet.

It is not so for parameters. In order to set the value for parameters a learner needs to be exposed to huge amounts of the new language. Language input is the evidence out of which the learner constructs knowledge of grammar. The child learns the first language by encountering actual sentences of the language. By the time the child reaches school age, there is comparatively little left for the teacher to do as far as the acquisition of first language grammar (parameters) is concerned. Few mistakes occur with regard to aspects of grammatical accuracy by native speaker pupils. By school age children already know how to operate correctly their first language (L1) grammatical system.



This, therefore, brings us to the crucial question: So what is the point of teaching L1 grammar at school? The point is that this aspect of language education should not be so much concerned with teaching the grammar, as with teaching **about** grammar. In fact, it should be concerned with **learning** (as opposed to teaching) **about** L1 grammar. For the purposes of this paper we shall not go into the issue of why we want students to learn about L1 grammar.² We shall go straight into a relation of how we should go about helping students learn about L1 grammar.

The Method

The grammatical system of the L1 is internalized in the minds of the native speaker students. Thus, knowledge about L1 grammar essentially consists in "raising to the level of consciousness the unconscious native speaker knowledge" (Camilleri 1988:21). Nora Galli de Paratesi (1993) sustains that:

Language learning implies reflection on language: it is the problem of grammar, suggested not as abstract and arid knowledge of a theoretical and terminological kind, but as a **reflection on the essential characters of language organisation in real use.** (our emphasis)

Within this view, the L1 grammar lesson develops in four stages. The students will be provided with contextualised language and will be required to employ their observational skills to decipher particular grammatical structures apparent in the chosen texts, and on the basis of which they then make hypotheses and draw conclusions on the structure of the language. The main steps in the lesson are the following:

1. The presentation of contextualised data.
2. Observation and discussion on the grammatical structure(s) in the text.
3. Making hypotheses about the grammatical structure(s).
4. Testing the hypotheses by looking at more data.
5. Verifying or modifying the hypotheses.

1. All language to be analysed is presented 'in context', whether it is spoken or written. Contextualised data is important for a variety of reasons. First of all, as Culler (1976:24) explains, language forms and structures are "members of a system defined by their relations to the other members of that system". Furthermore, contextualised data is likely to be more motivating and to have additional educational value (see Madsen & Bowen 1978).

As we tried out this method we could actually feel the students' interest in language learning grow over a period of several weeks. A word of caution to the teacher is needed though. The teacher needs to select texts very carefully. They must be particularly rich in the structures being analysed and, if possible, should not contain exceptions to the rule that would confuse the students at this stage.

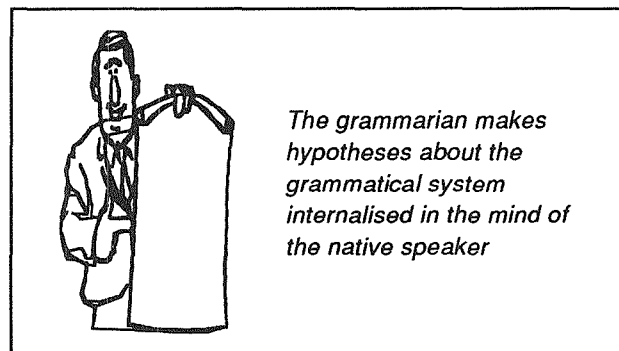
2. The contextualised language data will be used for observation by the students. At this stage a lot of help from the teacher is required. The teacher initially needs to guide the students to notice particular constructions, such as the different plural forms in Maltese, using a series of questions, or other exercises, eg. "List the nouns that appear in the text. How can we group members belonging to this list?". For a detailed example see Micallef (1995, Chapter 4). Initially, the teacher has to guide and help the students to become aware of structures, but if this method is used regularly, the students will start experimenting and using their own methods of analysis.

3. After the oral discussion of the particular structures, specific hypotheses can be drawn up by the students themselves. To take the case of the different plural forms in Maltese, students will at this stage, be

able to make hypotheses like "There are two ways of forming the plural in Maltese. One way is to add letters to the end of the noun in the singular, another way is to change the order of the letters inside the word". It is a pleasure hearing young learners analysing their native language and inferring about grammatical structures. As time goes by the students themselves will start exercising caution in making hypotheses and give the exercise careful thought, rather than guessing haphazardly as they might try to do initially.

4. The next stage will involve looking at some more data and basically repeating the first three steps. In this way, the hypotheses formulated at the third stage will be refined on the basis of further data.

5. At the end, the verified and refined hypotheses on the particular language structure(s) that have been generated by the students themselves, can be checked with a formal grammatical description provided by the grammarians of the language.



Our point of departure in this article was the need to appreciate the knowledge of language that the learners possess, so that instead of trying to teach them what they already know, we can help them go further by sharpening their observation skills and enhancing their metalinguistic sophistication. We would also like to argue that such a process, as outlined in the five steps above carry additional pedagogical value in that they stimulate autonomous learning skills, and cognitive strategies such as observation, comparing and contrasting, grouping, and the formation, testing, acceptance, rejection or modification of hypotheses.

It is a bottom-up process with a high element of discovery through personal work rather than the distribution of ready-made input. Following Balbi (1996) such method makes room for a pedagogy of choice by allowing students to make conscious and unconscious choices about what to say and how to say it; for a pedagogy of time, which allows students time to answer questions, to solve problems, to understand

input in an atmosphere of tolerance; and for a pedagogy of cooperation where pair-work and group-work are forms of social organisation that lead to autonomy.

Conclusion

We are aware that this is an innovative methodology in the teaching of L1 grammar in Malta. It has now been tried out by several student-teachers during their B.Ed. (Hons.) teaching-practice sessions, and evaluated in different contexts such as private schools, Junior Lyceums, Area Secondary Schools and Trade Schools (see Cauchi 1996). We are, therefore, very confident in its local applicability and motivational value, as well, of course, in its scientific soundness.

Notes

- ¹ 'Interlanguage' is a technical term that refers to the type of language produced by second- and foreign- language learners who are in the process of learning that language.
- ² For a discussion on this issue see Camilleri (1988). See also Little's article in this volume.

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