

# WORKING ON GRAMMAR AT SCHOOL IN L1 EDUCATION: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ACROSS LINGUISTIC REGIONS. INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

MARIE-CLAUDE BOIVIN\*, XAVIER FONTICH\*\*, REINOLD FUNKE\*\*\*,  
MARÍA-JOSÉ GARCÍA-FOLGADO\*\*\*\* & DEBRA MYHILL\*\*\*\*\*

*\* Université de Montréal, \*\* Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona \*\*\* Pädagogische  
Hochschule Heidelberg, \*\*\*\* Universitat de València, \*\*\*\*\* University of Exeter*

Empirical studies pertaining to working on grammar at school and its effects have not been the focus of L1 research in recent years. For instance, none of the current international large-scale studies investigates grammar learning. This might be the result of widespread doubts about the benefits of grammar learning for students, but—however justified one may consider such doubts to be—they should not lead researchers to neglect this topic. To be fair, research in the field has probably been hindered by the fact that there is virtually no exchange about findings across diverse linguistic regions, so that empirical results which emerged in one country have seldom been recognized in other countries. Variation across linguistic regions can be found not only in research results but also in research questions—a situation which one may consider tolerable in itself but which constitutes a problem when lack of communication between researchers on grammar learning and grammar instruction leaves a real gap, as is true in this case.

This special issue aims to offer an international overview of empirical research on grammatical learning at school within the context of L1 education (including learning about L1 grammar outside of L1 lessons, but excluding foreign language learning), and to deepen it by discussing recent approaches. Thus, the special issue is intended to provide a stimulus for further research on the subject and a starting

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Corresponding author: Xavier Fontich, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Departament de Didàctica de la Llengua i la Literatura, i de les Ciències Socials, Facultat de Ciències de l'Educació, Edifici G5, Campus UAB, 08193 – Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès, Barcelona, Spain), email: [xavier.fontich@uab.cat](mailto:xavier.fontich@uab.cat)

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point for the dissemination of international research into local research communities.

*What does the volume offer?*

The contributions to the special issue refer to research in the Anglophone, the Francophone, the Hispanic and the Germanophone regions, respectively. Each of them comprises a review of existing empirical research in the respective region and its theoretical underpinnings, and amplifies it by considering future directions for research as seen from a general viewpoint as well as from the viewpoint of the author's research program.

The extended tradition of debate and experimentation concerning the impact of grammar instruction on writing quality in Anglophone countries is the main focus of Debra Myhill's article "Grammar as a meaning-making resource for improving writing". In her critical analysis, Myhill demonstrates that the research done within this tradition has failed to specify causal hypotheses based on considerations about how grammar learning at school might impact on writing. She outlines her own research on grammar-writing connections, research which is based on presenting grammar to pupils not as a formal system but rather as a resource upon which students can draw when making grammatical choices. Finally, Myhill explores in detail the instructional conditions under which such an approach works and provides evidence for its efficiency.

Much of the overview of Francophone studies, titled "A review of the current empirical research on grammar instruction in the francophone regions", is devoted to classroom studies, mirroring the dominant methodological approach of empirical studies in the Francophonie. To underpin the overview conceptually, its author, Marie-Claude Boivin, makes a distinction between 'teaching methods', which are generic ideas about how to teach a subject, and 'teaching practices', which are on-the-spot implementations of such methods. The paper draws attention to the various conditions under which a modern approach to teaching grammar might replace the traditional approaches.

In "Grammar instruction in the Hispanic area: the case of Spain with attention to empirical studies on metalinguistic activity", Xavier Fontich and María-José García-Folgado report on research from an area in which both Spanish and Catalan are spoken. Many of the productive examples of empirical research on grammar learning in this area are based on case studies. The authors capitalize on the work of the research group GREAL in which pupils were observed negotiating formulations ('attempted texts') while collaborating on a writing task as well as discussing tasks targeting specific grammar concepts (e.g., transitivity, pronoun). Fontich and García-Folgado show that such discussions can be an incentive for activities in which grammar serves as a key to understanding what is at stake. Building on this, they make a case for making metalinguistic activity rather than the teaching of school grammar the main objective of L1 education.

According to Reinold Funke's report "Working on grammar at school: empirical research from German-speaking regions", research in Germanophone regions has mainly dealt with the type of knowledge pupils acquire when working on grammar. This knowledge has been understood to rest on the application of classification procedures, and the view has prevailed that knowledge will be automatically ready for use if it is conceptual by nature. Though it appears plausible that pupils do acquire some grammatical knowledge in L1 education, the question has been left open as to whether this impacts on their linguistic skills. Thus, Funke makes a case for re-conceptualizing grammar knowledge as accessing syntactic information generated in language processing rather than as constructing secondary epistemic representations.

*Is it possible to learn from other languages about grammar teaching in one's own language?*

Though the languages considered in this special issue are cognate, there are well-known syntactic differences between them. In English and French, case is in general not marked on nominal phrases, so features such as being the subject of a sentence or taking scope over other parts of the sentence tend to relate to sequential relations. In German and in Spanish, on the other hand, the presence of nominal case markers may make it possible to interpret syntactic functions or scope relations without relying on sequential order. In Spanish, personal pronouns may be omitted if they function as the subject of a sentence whereas in English, French and German their use is required by syntax. In French and German orthography, writers must continually mark syntactic features which do not manifest phonologically in spoken words. Given such peculiarities, is it possible to learn about teaching grammar in one L1 from research on teaching grammar in another L1?

Indeed, the contributions presented in this special issue suggest that teaching grammar and learning about one's L1 grammar are related to specifics of each particular language. For instance, in the Francophone tradition pupils are instructed to relate sentences to a basic configuration with canonical word order (*phrase de base*). In Spanish, considering pronouns includes considering the situation of speech in addition to pure syntax. In languages where there is a tight connection between orthography and grammar, some pupils' (and teachers') perception of their own language seems to be characterized by an illusion of omnipresent grammaticality, sometimes manifesting in the equation of syntax to orthography.

However, some observations reported in the present volume suggest that grammatical options which are absent in a language may impact on pupils speaking the said language when they consider it from a metalinguistic stance. Strangely enough, this became evident in misconceptions. For instance, in a crucial case, German students seemed to rely on linear order instead of sentence structure to determine adverbial scope. Spanish pupils classified verbal inflection morphemes as pronouns, thus taking the concept of pronoun to refer to a mandatory syntactic

element. In English, pupils sometimes drew on extra-syntactic features of written language, such as the presence of a comma, to arrive at a syntactic analysis, thereby exhibiting overreliance on spelling in a manner comparable to French-speaking pupils. Thus a feature which is absent from a language may nevertheless enter the scene when grammar is made a topic of consideration instead of just being used. This is one reason to expect that cross-linguistic comparisons of the learning and teaching of L1 grammar may help deepen the understanding of learning and teaching the grammar of a specific L1.

*What does research in the regions under consideration contribute to knowledge about grammar learning at school?*

Each of the articles in the volume stands for itself, and obviously the authors of the various articles do not concur on all issues considered herein. However, there are some strands which run through all articles. We would like to highlight three such strands.

The question of whether learning about grammar at school impacts on writing has traditionally been considered the shibboleth of grammar education. The reviews in the present volume give an impulse toward reconsidering this old debate. Notably Myhill, who has done groundbreaking studies on writing-grammar connections, gives evidence that the potential of grammar instruction to impact on writing has been traditionally underestimated as well as misconceptualised. The article by Fontich and García-Folgado extends this view by showing how grammatical meta-talk during collaborative writing makes the writing process more reflective. For her part, Boivin demonstrates that grammar instruction focusing on writing problems may impact on linguistic features of the texts pupils write. In his piece, Funke suggests that the investigation of grammar learning's impact on reading comprehension might profit from giving such research a more profound theoretical rationale, just as in the case of research on writing.

The conceptual knowledge pupils acquire in grammar instruction is a concern addressed in all four reviews. Even after years of schooling, the majority of pupils seem unable to give a notionally satisfactory account of syntactic phenomena. In view of the pervasive nature of this inability, it may be advisable to accept it as a fact of L1 education rather than decrying it as a problem. Notably, Boivin capitalizes on this concern by contrasting an 'expositive' model of grammar teaching to a 'heuristic' one. She presents evidence from Canadian studies suggesting that a heuristic style of teaching impacts favorably on pupils' spelling and writing errors. Fontich and García-Folgado make a related case by tracing back how, in the Hispanic world, a 'transmissive' model of teaching grammar has been only haltingly replaced by having pupils work on grammar in an 'active' fashion. Myhill takes a pragmatic stance with respect to the teaching of terminology and conceptual knowledge, while for Funke, distinguishing between grasping a syntactic feature and being able to describe it is a key concern.

During our preparation of the present volume, it became evident to us that the education and qualification of teachers has been a major topic of research in all linguistic regions considered. When discussing pupil-teacher-dialogues on grammar issues, all the reviews illustrate how the complexity of such dialogues puts high demands on teachers. This is a reason to expect that teacher qualifications (related to subject matter issues as well as related to pedagogical content knowledge) may play a key role for the quality of grammar learning at school. Whatever one thinks about the value of working on grammar with pupils, it seems essential for teachers to possess thorough grammar knowledge.

In sum, despite heterogeneity reflective of the diversity of approaches to grammar instruction in different linguistic domains (and within such domains as well), the contributions to the special issue suggest that much room is left for research beyond the global ‘to-grammar-or-not-to-grammar’ question. Instead of following a scattershot approach, research should start from specific and theoretically-substantiated hypotheses about how working on grammar might impact on writing and reading. It should examine what is really going on in classrooms instead of just trying to relate instructional methods to learning outcomes. The range of phenomena it considers must not be confined to teacher-initiated grammar instruction because making grammatical issues a topic of discourse may come about naturally in task-focused, collaborative peer interactions. Ultimately, access to the syntactic structure of an utterance is not necessarily tied to being able to describe it in linguistic terms (though practice in describing such structures may, in the long run, indirectly foster access to them).

#### *A cautionary note on terminology*

Some conceptual mist looms in the use of the term ‘explicit’ with respect to grammar education. This term occurs in all four contributions, appearing in various contexts such as ‘explicit knowledge’, ‘explicit analysis’, ‘explicit description’ and ‘explicit instruction’. One should not assume that it means the same in all these contexts and across the articles.

The terms *attribut* in French and *Attribut* in German are real false friends. The German *Attribut* denotes what is called an *épithète* in French, and what is called *attribut* in French is labeled *prädikativ* in German. Also note that the expression *direct access* (to a syntactic phenomenon) is used differently in a study reported by Boivin as compared to the use Funke makes of it in his contribution: it means ‘access via self-constructed sentences’ in the former, and ‘access not based on analytical considerations’ in the latter.

#### *An invitation to join us*

Reading through the articles one may get the impression that, thus far, there have been some spare connections between Hispanic and Francophone research, and,

perhaps to a lesser extent, between Francophone and Anglophone research (the latter two being mediated by Canadian Francophone work). The objective of the special issue is to deepen the interconnections across empirical research in diverse linguistic regions, thereby contributing to a re-activation of the debate on grammar instruction in L1 education. We are well aware that the research done in the four regions considered here is but a small subset of the wealth of empirical work done on the topic internationally. We welcome any future contributions to this journal which might broaden and enrich our overview of empirical research on grammar learning and instruction in compulsory L1 education by reviewing empirical studies in other linguistic regions.