

INTRO TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE  
*RESEARCH ON L1 GRAMMAR IN SCHOOLING:*  
MEDIATION AT THE HEART OF LEARNING GRAMMAR

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Abstract

Educational linguistics lays at the interface of contributions from linguistics (in our case focused on L1) and education. It aims at teaching students in compulsory schooling how to engage in fruitful reflection when facing both language in use (especially in the written mode) and language as a system, approaching language as something worthwhile exploring and targeting the development of students' encyclopaedic knowledge about it. In this context, the educational game can be seen as a process in which specific contents are made accessible to specific learners through mediation, which comprises well-articulated conceptual systems, as well as methodological procedures, directly provided by teachers in the classroom. Nonetheless, such mediation can indirectly be provided by other agents (curriculum theorists, linguists, material designers, etc.), and this is the focus of the papers in this special issue: the role of linguistics, teachers' beliefs and preparedness, the role of grammar in the curriculum, the concepts of sentence, and the difficulties in linking grammar knowledge and knowledge on language use. The ultimate goal of this special issue is to contribute a common ground for a debate.

Keywords: educational linguistics, language as a system, language in use, mediation, metalinguistic reflection

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A centipede was happy—quite!  
 Until a toad in fun  
 Said, "Pray, which leg moves after which?"  
 This raised her doubts to such a pitch,  
 She fell exhausted in the ditch  
 Not knowing how to run.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this well-known poem, attributed to Katherine Craster (1841–1874), a frolicsome toad poses the centipede an apparently naïve question that puts her in a disturbing situation: that of trying in vain to disentangle explicitly and consciously what she can execute intuitively. Karl Popper refers to it as the “centipede effect”: once the gullible centipede tries to answer the intriguing question (posed by a spider in Popper’s version), she is “paralysed ever since” (Popper & Notturmo, 1995, p.116). Popper refers to those actions such as playing the violin or driving a car, which involve a number of sub-actions that, operating below the threshold of consciousness, allow us to focus our attention on more important things, such as presenting the whole piece or pay full attention to the traffic situations.

This could also be the case for the grammatical knowledge. A number of authors (see, for instance, Nadeau & Fisher, 2011; Boivin, 2014, 2018; Hudson, 2016; Camps, 2020a) consider that grammar lessons should engage students in meaningful reflections on interesting and challenging linguistic instantiations, with the objective to reach a better understanding of specific linguistic subsystems. Indeed, they maintain that the linguistic intuitions that all students have should come into play. Not with the objective of making explicit what remains unconscious (something that would paralyse them as the centipede in the fable, Hernanz (1997) reckons), but rather with the objective of raising students’ awareness on the fact that they possess a very good lab to adopt a metalinguistic stance via introspection.

Crucially, such introspection would necessarily need to be nurtured by a set of well-articulated grammatical concepts (of a lexical, syntactic, and discursive nature) and manipulative procedures (combining, contrasting, commuting, etc.) to allow a deep reflection and not just a spontaneous appreciation of linguistic material (Boivin, 2012; Van Rijt et al. 2019; Camps, 2020b). This resonates with the Vygotskian position regarding the importance of an explicit system of scientific concepts, that allows the learner to consciously rely on it when solving specific and ill-structured problems (Miller, 2011); also, with Popper’s words, when he considers that only if we reach a conscious control “we know what we are doing” (p.117).

According to Hernanz (1997) and Camps (2020a), relying on one’s own intuition as well as on a well-articulated set of concepts and procedures would help to explore grammar subsystems sedimented both in our own minds and in social practices (in school and outside school), as well as unpack interesting connections and regularities. It would also help contrast (and sometimes try to compensate) the different

linguistic sensitivities among pupils within multilingual and socially diverse classrooms (see for instance, Gauvin & Thibeault, 2016; Fontich, 2020). Nonetheless, José de Caso, one of the major linguists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Spain, contends that language education should primarily aim at a better knowledge of “language as a means of expression”:

to know language itself, as we have previously pointed out, and to know it, not in any way (since, being our daily means of communication, some knowledge of it we all have), but more and better than is possible by just the practice and constant use; and it is obvious that, since every language is a means of expression, we will not be able to achieve that purpose, if, attentive to its nature as a medium, we do not examine it in relation to its purpose. (Caso, 1879, p.215, as cited in García-Folgado, 2019)

Caso primarily focuses on a communicative objective to know how language works as a “means” (i.e., as a communicative tool). However, he does not entirely dismiss neither our intuitive capacity as speakers nor our knowledge on how language works as a “medium” (i.e., as a system). We align with those studies that defend the importance of students’ intuitions and, especially, the need to focus on both realms: language system and language use. This would ultimately allow to reach a higher understanding of how language works, on the basis of the following assumption: grammar is a well-worth exploring domain, a valuable knowledge in itself, and a cultural capital of any literate citizen at the same level of any other natural, social, artistic, and mathematical knowledge—e.g., basic notions on the Soviet Revolution, main differences between Middle Age and Renaissance, the vegetal world, algorithms, etc. (Ribas et al., 2014; Myhill, 2016; Forget & Gauvin, 2017; Van Rijt et al., 2020a; Van Rijt, forthcoming).

In sum, when approaching grammar teaching, we must conceptualize the educational game as a process in which specific contents are made accessible to specific learners through mediation, which provides well-articulated conceptual systems, as well as methodological procedures targeting the language-as-a-means and at the language-as-a-medium. Such mediation might be enacted directly by the teachers acting within the classroom through processes of scaffolding. But, crucially, it can also be enacted indirectly by other agents, such as curriculum theorists, linguists, material designers, pre-service teacher educators, etc. This is the viewpoint that serves to frame the present special issue, in which papers focus respectively on the role of linguistics in teaching the structure of the language (Denham), teachers’ beliefs and preparedness when facing the grammar-writing interplay (Casas-Deseures, Comajoan-Colomé, & Santolària-Òrrios), the role of grammar in the curriculum over the last years (Costa), the concepts of sentence adopted to improve reflection on punctuation and syntax complexity (Nadeau, Quevillon Lacasse, Giguère, Arseneau, & Fisher) and the necessary re-conceptualization of some aspects in grammar teaching, that may constitute the origin of the difficulties in linking grammar knowledge and knowledge on language use (Bulea-Bronckart) (see section 5 below).

## 2. EDUCATION AS A MEDIATED PROCESS BETWEEN A CONTENT AND A LEARNER

We can conceptualize education as a process of ordering a specific content within a continuum, from what is simple to what is complex (equating simple-easy and complex-difficult) to guarantee that after a specific time lapse, all learners reach a common standard via direct instruction and access to sources of information. This neo-conductist approach is increasingly being supported by governmental and corporate actions worldwide (Mundy & Verger, 2015), apparently inspired by the spirit of competence-based curricula. However, there is another way of conceptualizing what competence-based curricula stand for, in the antipodes of the aforementioned perspective, supported by governments, and more in tune with a socioconstructivist conception of the educational game (Rychen & Salganik, 2002).

From this viewpoint, we understand teaching as the creation of rich and stimulating environments that encourage students to explore interesting questions, engage in intellectual challenges, and face problems for which there is not always a single answer (Cubero, 2005). In short, an environment of productive and deliberate activities in which students participate in order to progressively master instruments and cultural practices (Wells, 1999). From this perspective, the student is conceived as an active (yet not solitary) agent, who does not learn by simply discovering, but also by interacting with the others within a framework set up by the teacher, and meant to elaborate ways of interpreting the world. In this context, a reflective teacher experiences, shares, and creates material and contributes to the dialogue with other teachers, avoiding solipsistic positions.

According to competence-based curricula, schooling has to prepare the future citizens to face a changeable world, with uncertainties triggered by technology revolution, migration flows, and scarce access to commodities for personal and economic growth (Rychen & Salganik, 2002). In sum, future citizens will be capable of dealing assertively with unexpected and ill-defined situations. This involves the capacity of mobilising one's capacities (know-what or conceptual knowledge, know-how or procedural skills, know-why or assertiveness and confidence) to solve situations that are reluctant to ad-hoc solutions.

Under this conceptual umbrella, we find a plethora of theories (such as constructionist, Piagetian or Vygotskian positions), sometimes very different with regards to central issues (such as the interplay between instruction and development, or the role of the social sphere in learning), but in all cases facing the same basic question: How can we teach what the learners themselves have to build? (see Coll, 2000).

Becoming competent would not result from rote learning and ritual procedures, anchored in specific contexts and difficult to be transferred to new situations, but rather from internal processes of principles constructions, learned in different contexts and with the mediation of more capable peers, including teachers and schoolmates (Bruner, 1986; Edwards & Mercer, 2012; Fernandez et al., 2015).

### 3. MEDIATION AT THE HEART OF GRAMMAR TEACHING

The invited editors are members of the EduLing-Educational Linguistics, a special interest group of ARLE (International Association for Research in L1 Education, <http://www.arle.be>), and therefore position themselves in the field of educational linguistics. This field results from the confluence of linguistics and education, two vast and dynamic territories with their own epistemologies, frames, and debates. Nonetheless, the encounter of the two neither entails a relationship of hierarchy, nor a simple conflation. Rather, it articulates a new field, nurtured indeed by linguistic content that must be reallocated within a specific context, namely that of language education in compulsory schooling (see Van der Aalsvoort & Kroon, 2015).

Language education and linguistics may have (and indeed have) common points, but they are different territories with distinct goals, as Noam Chomsky reminds very wisely in his response during a seminar (Chomsky, 1988). In this respect, the goals of grammar teaching and the goals of linguistics are not and cannot be coincidental. Linguistic theories are the result of sets of principles and perspectives meant to shed light onto specific territories of linguistic phenomena. Additionally, they are meant to be put under constant scrutiny to avoid reifications, and keep the dialogue within the discursive community alive. Language education, on the other hand, needs stable frames that can be widely shared and implemented, comprising key issues such as which content does society consider to be taught, ways of teaching and assessing this content, how to deal with the obstacles in learning it, etc.

However, even though language education and linguistics have different goals, this does not mean that language education cannot (or indeed, should not) be informed by insights from linguistics. Nonetheless, two basic questions remain: which linguistic theoretical persuasion might inform grammar teaching, and how should we address the necessary transformation of such content into academic content?

First, with regards to linguistic schools, there are several options, such as generative frameworks (Georgiagentis et al., 2020), cognitive frameworks (Giovanelli, 2015), systemic functional frameworks (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) or a combination of crucial conceptual insights from different linguistic theories altogether (Van Rijt & Coppen, 2017), based on a linguistic consensus. Currently, the SFL-informed frameworks appear to be dominant in grammar teaching research, for instance in some contexts of Anglophone and Hispanic regions (see Van Rijt, De Swart & Coppen, 2019; Camps and Milian, 2020). Albeit there still a long way to go in classroom practice, curricular design, etc. In this vein, contributions such as Zayas' (2020) and Camps and Milian's (2020) in L1 (see the same position for L2 in Swain et al.'s 2009, and Larsen-Freeman's 2003) defend a grammar based on a functionalist stance and contend that any linguistic material results from the organic interplay between meaning, intentions, and form. Hence, according to Fontich (2019), the expression "decontextualized grammar" is in fact an oxymoron, since "any single linguistic instance (even if detached from actual communicative contexts) would be loaded with potential meanings in connection with potential intentions" (p.28).

In combining form, meaning, context and the interplay between them, Copen (2009) highlights the need to explore how students can scrutinize linguistic material and feel engaged in creative manipulation, to uncover underlying connections among the different elements under observation. This author maintains that students can enjoy playing with language forms, and highlights the importance of approaching grammar both within the context of use and outside such context, stating that “Simply condemning isolated grammar exercises is like condemning the technical training of a volleyball smash under the argument that you can best learn it in the competition itself. This is of course not true” (p. 15).

And secondly, regarding the transformation of such content, education needs a type of “filter”, a so-called “didactic transposition”, assuming that the content undergoes a series of transformations (see Chevallard, 1991; Bronckart & Plazaola, 1998; Gauvin, 2014; Camps, 2020a & 2020b): from the so-called “wise knowledge” (as it comes from scientific fields or social practices) to a “teachable knowledge” (according to the school own objectives, the students’ levels of development, etc.), which might eventually become “taught knowledge” (tinted with the teachers’ own beliefs and preparedness and not always completely in accordance with the curriculum), as well as “learned knowledge” (as a result of the idiosyncratic reconstruction by each student). Indeed, such process has an ascending counterpart, in which the learned knowledge informs the other aspects (for instance, the teachable knowledge) (Gauvin, 2014). This shows that the educational process is not in any way a linear itinerary and that measures to better understand the much-needed mediation between the content and the learner must be adopted. Mediation is a key concept here.

#### 4. THE DIFFERENT SCOPES OF MEDIATION

Because this mediation acts upon a number of different territories (classroom, content, curriculum, teachers’ beliefs, teacher education and so on), it crystallizes in a diversity of ways and levels, and focuses on different issues, tied to the notions of transposition and transfer (Bruner, 1986; Bronckart & Plazaola, 1998). That is, we shall transpose (i.e., reconceptualize) the knowledge built outside of school to adjust it to the school conditions and demands, beyond the internal coherence of the disciplines and social practices of reference. Also, we shall examine how to facilitate a way of teaching that will be useful for the students when transferring their knowledge to new situations.

We can explore how such mediation operates within the classroom, when the teacher orchestrates the classroom talk, either directly (Myhill, Newman, & Watson, 2020) or indirectly (within instructional sequences that prompt peer and small group discussions; Fontich, 2014, 2020). From a sociocultural viewpoint, this mediation (or “scaffolding”) responds to a threefold movement of contingency (the more capable peer is responsive with the learner’s actual zone of proximal development), gradual withdrawal of support (in inverse proportion to the level of the learner’s autonomy),

and transfer of responsibility. In this mediated process, the learner relinquishes his/her control of the situation to the more capable peer, in what Miller (2011) names “other-regulated” processes (triggering Cazden’s (2020) “performance before competence”), oriented to an internalization and ultimately leading to self-regulation.

But mediation can also be explored when it is located in instances other than the classroom: content and role of the linguistic theories, curricular dispositions, in- and pre-service teacher education programs, sentence-based notions, possible frameworks to interrelate the dimensions of language system and language use without conflating them, but instead, considering how they can be brought into the classroom. This is where the papers in this special issue fall into. We could say that the five papers in this special issue explore ways of facing the distance between a given content, and a potential learner meant to learn this content. They all implicitly position themselves in the idea that such distance cannot be solved automatically (“What we teach is what they learn”) but needs a process of mediation.

## 5. THE PAPERS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

When dealing with the tradition of grammar teaching, we can reflect on the role linguistics has played and which mediation might adjust the space (the classroom), in accordance to specific learners and linguistic procedures. Denham’s contribution in this special issue (*Positioning students as linguistic and social experts: Teaching grammar and linguistics in the United States*) refers to the study of grammar as the study of the structure of language, and states that it has diminished in US schools. This author presents several reasons for which we should focus on linguistics instead of grammar, and does so in different academic levels (primary, secondary, pre-service teacher education, and studies of linguistics). She reveals some benefits of this change of scope: to reveal unconscious knowledge of language, to employ scientific methodology, to have students fully understand the systematicity of all languages/dialects, and to work to eradicate the discrimination that comes with a focus on a privileged variety of standardized grammar.

When dealing with the ideas that the society requires to teach in schools, we may explore the way these ideas crystallize in curricular packs, for instance: In which way the Portuguese curriculum has been reconceptualized over the last decades, and what has been the role attributed to grammar content when linking communicative objectives and learners? Costa (*Grammar teaching 91-19: An analysis of the Portuguese curriculum*) describes the evolution of grammar instruction in the Portuguese curriculum over the last thirty years, focusing on the concept of grammar, its role regarding communicative skills, and the degree of explicitness. The analysis reveals cyclical tensions that can be synthesized in three dichotomies: dependence/autonomy, prescriptivism/descriptivism, and language proficiency/reflective thinking. The study suggests that these results might contribute towards a common ground for analysis of curricular dispositions in other countries.

Another key issue is the preparedness of teachers to deal with complex issues, such as the interplay between grammar and writing: In which way may unpacking teacher's beliefs help us shed light onto teacher education programs and more coherent practices? Casas-Deseures et al. (*The beliefs of primary education teachers regarding writing and grammar instruction*) explore primary teachers' beliefs and their declared practices on the interplay of writing and grammar instruction: the results suggest that teachers draw on grammar notions at a sentence level rather than at a textual level, and that it might partially explain the methodological obstacles in integrating writing and grammar. According to the authors, while this problem has been addressed by research with interesting contributions, these results suggest a lack of transference from research into practice, in the form of a pedagogic grammar for teacher education.

We can also explore what the most operative sentence-based concepts are, so that they allow for a more meaningful and comprehensive metalinguistic reflection: What are these concepts and which kind of tasks do they allow? Nadeau et al. (*Teaching syntax and punctuation in French L1: How the notion of sentence was operationalized in innovative didactic devices*) present some of the difficulties in punctuation that Francophone students experience, as well as the lack of syntactic complexity in their sentences. To address syntactic and punctuation phenomena, the notions of "syntactic sentence" (*phrase syntaxique*) and "graphic sentence" (*phrase graphique*) are adopted. These key concepts are introduced in an instructional sequence, to support metalinguistic discussions with effects on both students and teachers.

Lastly, we may assume that language, instantiated as communicative human activity, can also be approached detached from this activity as a rich system: How can we address both dimensions in what appears in reality as a unity and establish bridges that reinforce our writing competence? Bulea-Bronckart (*Reflections on teaching devices articulating grammar and text*) addresses the grammar-text interplay as a real challenge for language teaching and teacher training. The origins and characteristics of this problem in Francophone Switzerland are examined, revealing that some of the problems are anchored in specific conceptions of school grammar and its purposes. Some preliminary results of a research program, "Principles of a fundamental didactics of grammar" (focused on noun complements and past tenses), reveal the need to re-examine the very status of these grammatical objects, and the efficient pedagogical approaches they require.

## 6. LAST WORDS ON THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue can be treated as a response to the last issues of *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* devoted to grammar instruction, i.e., the issue in 2018 (Boivin et al., 2018) and the follow-up of Rättyä et al. (2019), in which the authors invited others to explore grammar teaching in different educational jurisdictions, with the objective of highlighting commonalities, controversies, and



idiosyncrasies. Previously, Boivin et al. (2018) offered “an international overview of empirical research on grammatical learning at school within the context of L1 education” (p.1), in Francophone, Anglophone, Germanic, and Hispanic areas; the latter focused on studies from Czech, Dutch, Finnish, Polish, and Spanish educational contexts. Now, we present studies located in the United States, Spain, Portugal, and Francophone Switzerland and Canada.

The origin of this special issue lays in the *III International Conference on Teaching Grammar* held in Barcelona in January 2019, which hosted more than 250 delegates from 30 countries. This conference has inspired a number of actions, such as the special issues by Reig et al. (2020) and Marcotte et al. (2020), devoted to present empirical studies by junior researchers, which reveals the interest that this field raises and is also a testimony of the renewed interest on grammar teaching over the last years (see, for instance, Myhill & Newman, 2019; Myhill, Newman, & Watson, 2020; Myhill, Watson, & Newman, 2020; Van Rijt & Coppén, 2017; Van Rijt et al., 2019b; Van Rijt et al., 2020a; Van Rijt et al., 2020b; Camps & Fontich, 2020; Fontich, 2016, 2019; Beaulne & Gauvin, 2017; Bélanger & Gauvin, forthcoming; Gauvin et al. 2017; Fontich & Rodríguez-Gonzalo, 2020).

In this conference, a wide array of themes were explored, such as grammar and writing interplay, the role of linguistic theories, the history of grammar teaching, pedagogic material, teacher education, obstacles children and teachers must overcome when facing grammar, etc., considered them all important aspects in research on grammar teaching (see respectively, for instance, Myhill et al., 2012; Hudson, 2016; Van Rijt et al., 2019; Trotzke & Tupisch, 2020; Fontich & García-Folgado, 2018; Gourdet, forthcoming; Hudson & Walmsley, 2005; Wijnands et al., forthcoming; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez & Pérez-Ocón, forthcoming; Camps & Fontich, 2019).

We believe that the papers we present will contribute to shed light into the territory of language education, and specifically of grammar teaching.

To summarize, educational linguistics lays in the interface of contributions from linguistics (broadly speaking focused on L1) and education. It aims at teaching students in compulsory schooling how to get engaged in fruitful reflection when facing a) language in use (especially in the written mode) and b) language as a system, approaching language as something worth-well exploring and targeting at the development of students' encyclopaedic knowledge about it.

In this context, the educational game can be seen as a process in which specific contents are made accessible to specific learners through mediation, directly provided by the teachers and indirectly provided by other agents (curriculum theorists, linguists, material designers, etc.), and which comprises well-articulated conceptual systems, as well as methodological procedures.

From this perspective, grammar knowledge and the capacity it allows to reflect on language ought not to be approached anymore as a space operating in its own, but as the backbone of the language curriculum, which stands as a broad field that includes issues such as communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and interacting), literary competence, vernacular practices, digital enculturation,

language critical awareness, etc. The ultimate goal is to address language in a rich, broad, and comprehensive way as “one of the major places of properly human development” (Bronckart, 2020, p. 28).

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