

Language Teaching and Grammar: Practices and Implications in the Multimedia Age

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Abstract Attempts to reflect on the not always idyllic relationship between language teaching and grammar are not entirely obvious and seem to recur more frequently in the light of recent technological discoveries, which have revolutionized both methods and processes. Starting from the role played by grammar within language teaching, the present study aims to investigate linguistic practices and structural considerations, including the Eclectic approach, which is characterised by experimentation and indeterminateness. This study will consider the underlying dynamics of the action-oriented approach proposed by the CEFR, which, thanks to new technologies, sensitizes learners to the otherness, to the inner workings of the language in communicative, comparative and functional modes as required by the demands of today's new, flexible and computerised society.

Keywords Language Teaching, Inductive Grammar, CEFR, Action-oriented Approach, Eclectic Approach, ICT

1. Introduction

Although grammar has long been an essential reference point and provided indispensable support in language teaching/learning, for many years now it has been neglected or even demonised and transformed into a bugbear by openly pedantic students and, sometimes, teachers. This has frequently been the case because its support function has been underestimated and methodologies that are unsuitable to specific times and learners' needs have been preferred. From the second world war on, we have witnessed a succession of theories that alternately consider grammar as necessary or superfluous without substantially modifying the learner's approach towards grammar rules and functions (here we refer to the traditional and the direct methods, to the audio-lingual and the structure-global audio-visual methodologies and to the communicative approach). In

addition, there is an equally superficial approach which has considered the mother tongue (L1) or the target language (L2) as single reference points without considering their ability to interact. This is the case of the traditional grammar-translation method which merely entailed a simple comparison of the two languages with no space for considerations of the inter-lingual phases, whose predominant role in L1 gradually weakens in favour of L2. Bearing in mind that L1 generates more interference and difficulties in the various stages of the L2 learning process, there are many reasons why prejudice has arisen around the concept of reflection on the language. In particular, these include the promotion and reproduction of a now established literary language, a fairly fixed orthographic system, the development of logical reasoning and the attempt to unify the various speech modes. All these features have distanced learners from their basic objectives which essentially entail the production and comprehension of language.

One of the effects of psycholinguistics [1] was to focus attention on the issue of motivation and on game playing as a facilitator of the implicit learning process while the *éducation nouvelle*¹ contributed to providing psychological guidance to the learner. Then, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the introduction of new methods in foreign language teaching² which primarily concerned grammar practices and marked the transition from the merely deductive to the more modern and flexible

1 The *éducation nouvelle* was a pedagogical movement that supported the principle of active participation of learners in their education. In 1899 Adolphe Ferrière promoted the setting up of the Bureau International des Ecoles nouvelles and in 1912 he published a broad programme with the main features underlying this progressive education which, from the end of the 19th century, no longer considered children as insignificant but regarded them as subjects whose future prospects should be guaranteed. This desire for change in the education system was based on the concept of the school being a non-clerical alternative in the light of the education laws passed by Jules Ferry. Every pupil should expect to find three essential elements in school: *pain, savoir et tendresse*.

2 In particular, the audio-lingual method (supported by the theories of B.F. Skinner, Leonard Bloomfield, Giorgio Shenker and Robin Callan) and the structure-global method centred on the use of audio-visual material (essentially based on the theories of Saussure), both of which gained in popularity during the 1950s and the 1960s.

inductive approach³.

However, references to the linguistics of the audio-lingual approach which characterised the decades following the second world war identified a number of limitations due essentially to the descriptive nature of language, not yet included within the principle of contextualised grammar. Of course, the idea of a variety of material containing references to a micro-language might have raised stress levels in the learner who needed to follow a gradual and innovative path.

Striving to learn grammar rules in order to express oneself correctly dates neither from this nor the last century. Indeed, Jean-Pierre Cuq [2] states that grammar appears in the oldest human attempts at acquiring knowledge, which means that man has always tried to tackle and understand the rules underlying linguistic expression.

Nevertheless, over the years the so called *besoins langagiers* changed, replacing the centrality of the subject to be taught in order to overcome the static nature of previous approaches towards language and grammar. With no reference to the L2 social context, learning the target language was often ineffectual and aimed merely at exercise based on a rigid progression of grammar structures. As a result, the concept of grammar in a specific situation came to the fore. The situational approach assigned greater importance to the flexibility of the learning process in relation to the heterogeneous nature of the learner groups, and it is the very concept of flexibility and adaptation to the learner's needs that heralded a new season drawing on the theories of Ferdinand Brunot and declared the need for the co-building of knowledge [3].

Meanwhile, the communicative approach to language learning, which considers language as a tool for communication and social interaction, ended up favouring the strictly pragmatic aspect to the detriment of formal accuracy. The introduction of the Threshold Level [4] marked a new approach to grammar, assigning it a less important role than in more traditional methods and placing an increasing emphasis on the socio-pragmatic, paralinguistic and extra-linguistic aspects. The countless *actes de parole*, generated by research into language learning and which could not be defined or predetermined by a teacher, encouraged a constantly new negotiation and reflection which largely characterised the focus of the eclectic approach [5]. The latter returned to the concept of communication playing a central and irreplaceable role and the focus seemed to shift from the strictly linguistic context to a more social and immediately communicative one. A debate began on the use of grammar in language learning

and, in particular, Salvador Benadava [6] provocatively asked "*Que faites-vous de la grammaire?*", paraphrasing the question from a few years earlier "*Que faites-vous de la culture?*".

2. Grammar, Eclecticism and Methodological Coherence

The communicative approach has inspired teaching experts to produce material with a linguistic and cultural content in order to meet learners' communicative requirements but also for specific contexts. It may happen that the proposed communicative situations for teaching purposes do not satisfy these needs but merely recycle old clichés or patterns dreamed up by experts detached from the real contexts. The gap between tradition and modernity lies in the adoption of the approach based on contextualisation. Of course, this approach does not always depend on the needs of the learner group and often presents situations in which the grammar structures are learnt implicitly and without prior reflection. Didactic choices regarding the grammar structure do not always stem from empirical research or the dictates of traditional linguistic progression. The eclectic approach is a central issue in language teaching and constitutes a sort of reply to the complexity of current teaching approaches that, without following rigid guidelines as happened in the past, run the risk of being transformed into hybrid teaching choices determined on a purely arbitrary basis.

In addition to this risk, there is a sort of systematic recycling of a variety of didactic principles to meet a wide range of needs. Naturally, as eclecticism is not a methodology proper but simply an approach, it needs varied and constantly renewed support, which places it halfway between innovation and tradition. It thus benefits from the support offered by new technologies and from the Council of Europe's recommendations on the issue of tasks [7]. From the year 2000 on, eclecticism seems to adopt an action-based perspective which encourages constant interaction in the class group and requires preferably authentic materials destined for a target that can inductively acquire contents and structures and put them into practice according to a collaborative and/or cooperative approach. The aim of this approach is to encourage learners to perform specific communicative tasks in which each of them is involved and is called upon to play their part. The principle remains that of the communicative approach, i.e. involving the learner in a theme-based, real communicative dynamic in which the structures are learnt implicitly, but the novelty lies in the fact that the activities are enhanced with a specific assignment that consists of a problem to solve, a task to perform or a project to complete without having to exclude use of L1 whenever this proves necessary. Obviously the support provided by new technologies greatly facilitates

3 The inductive method tends to stimulate the students' abilities of reflection during their language learning. It leads the learner to identify regular patterns within the workings of a language through the observation and comparison of both written and spoken language before the teacher explicitly states the grammar rule. During intermediate phases, the learner discovers and detects individual problems which make it possible to formulate hypotheses that, once verified, help to define the rule.

the search for a wide range of authentic materials in a decidedly short time frame. Underlying this approach is an instrumental use of language, employed not as a goal but merely as a means of communication. The use of tasks recommended by the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which was put together by the Council of Europe in order to standardize the levels of language competence in different regions, is widely used all over the world and all important examinations are mapped to it) allows use of L1 to ensure that learners (especially beginners) will receive authentic rather than teacher-generated communication. This will prove to be indispensable when the semantic field of reference calls for a different arrangement between the learner's L1 and L2 [8]. The objective of the new approach, which first appeared at the beginning of the new millennium, is the development of learning strategies and techniques which do not rule out the possibility for the learner to use L1 for the acquisition of structures requiring knowledge of a metalanguage [9]. The learner's own language and culture emerge as strength and a starting point for those activities adopted by post-communicative methodologies, such as the explanation of assignments, the definition of grammar rules following individual and group reflection, and so on. Every learner is the result of a solid culture base, characterised by rules, individual cognitive styles and specific strategies. Initially the approach focuses on *learning to learn*, i.e. the learner has to acquire the learning techniques that will facilitate the tasks throughout the learning process and in the various inter-lingual phases. Although the so-called natural methods for language learning maintained that the learner acquires the language naturally, knowledge of the structures and an awareness of the learning process nevertheless greatly enhance improvement in written and oral expression.

The use of prior knowledge combined with the reuse of known structures aims to render the learner independent by means of dynamic approaches that complement their skills. In actual fact, this initiates a process that makes learners responsible for checking, through reflection on the linguistic resources used, their initial knowledge threshold, the progress they make and some early forms of self-observation and self-assessment. We thus have a process of selective learning strategies where a specifically activated dynamic approach helps to enhance the communicative goal without neglecting the linguistic goal that nevertheless remains implicit in full respect of the action-oriented approach.

Upstream of such an operative scheme is the concept of stabilisation of the language learning/teaching paths, which neither slavishly follow the traditional grammatical progression nor eschew an excessive amount of information to supply to the learner. Learners are not stressed by the new input because they are able to activate a set of more or less well-known information and structures through mainly traditional activities that are, however,

inserted in totally new paths. In the light of the rules proposed by the implicit grammar underlying the action approach, the eclectic approach presents a first order of problems regarding coherence. This is not a fundamental feature of the eclectic approach which, by its very nature, envisages hybrid systems and implies specific forms of coherence limited to particular cases [10]. In actual fact, the proposed activities must be cohesive and aim at a single objective despite envisaging different methodologies without ever indulging in an apparent incoherence outside the language learning process. This all focuses on the essential goal of making the learning process efficacious, effective and long-lasting as, if this objective is not reached, any learner would be tempted to abandon the learning practices.

3. The Inductive Approach and the Re-Evaluation of Grammar

The teaching of grammar has recently been proposed at an institutional level even for native speakers. "L'enseignement de la grammaire, apprentissage des règles de la langue, des régularités et des exceptions, est fondamentale et doit faire l'objet d'un enseignement spécifique à l'école et au collège"[11]. In this case the target students are French and, therefore, the L1 language is FLM (Français Langue Maternelle) but the recommendation is significant and has also been extended to FLE (Français Langue Étrangère) to the extent that the approaches to learning L1 and L2 tend to converge. In reality there are three objectives in this grammar proposal: to prepare teachers for a careful reading of the best grammar books, to encourage everyone to undertake more systematic reflections from a semantic, morphological and syntactic point of view, and to present a corpus of recurring errors and activities to help eliminate them. The main merit of this proposal lies in the effort to encourage a correct understanding of the grammar system as a whole and not of individual structures, unlike the traditional approach. On the question of eclecticism, Geneviève-Dominique de Salins [12] offers, for the first time, a significant contribution to overcome the limitations deriving from the lack of a single, strong approach on which to calibrate every operative strategy. As the inductive approach is based on experience and observation and thus does not always guarantee certainty, it is associated to a clear principle that requires the setting and reaching of a target: grammar as a whole and not according to a normative approach.

From a theoretical viewpoint, one proposal tending towards a greater awareness of the limitations imposed by the eclectic approach made reference to Jean-Claude Béacco [13] who was mindful of the dangers awaiting an arbitrary tendency above all as far as grammar is concerned, which calls for clearer and less ambiguous learning

frameworks.

A more “natural” learning process, which is what the eclectic approach envisages, might be enhanced by a reflection on the language so as to fix its operational patterns. This would aim to provide a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) [14] able to activate the so-called Language Acquisition Device (LAD) [15] as this form of acquisition allows the learner to observe the input, make hypotheses, receive feedback, insert these hypotheses into a context and systematically arrange them. This can be achieved through techniques that the eclectic approach has developed over the last few decades, such as inclusion, exclusion, seriation and manipulation [16].

As to the empirical nature of the eclectic approach, Christian Puren furnishes a meaningful definition: *éclectisme d’adaptation* [17]. He then goes on to define a system that can adapt to the needs of both teachers and learners alike and identifies the fundamental novelty of the eclectic approach in its questioning the principle of “faire penser les élèves directement en langue étrangère” [18]. This points out the extent to which “les rapports entre théorie (didactologique ou méthodologique) et pratique (d’enseignement) tendent à se dé-hiérarchiser d’eux-mêmes” [19]. This reasoning shows that there are no methods or concepts that are valid *a priori* for learners and teachers. According to this approach, any path can be followed in the name of constant and predominant experimentation, even if it has already been previously tried. This nevertheless generates uncertainty and complexity in which it is often easy to become entangled. With no clear reference points or well-defined epistemological foundations, uncertainty lies waiting to ambush learners and teachers, and although this can lead to further investigation it may also be purely arbitrary. Jean Jacques Richer defines this approach as *éclectisme sauvage* [20] which is tackled, in his view, by very few teaching experts.

Richer defines the current situation as a sort of *résurgence de l’éclectisme*, a phenomenon stemming essentially from the proposals of the CEFR and tending towards the need subsequently defined by Edgar Morin as the “paradigme de simplification” [21], which basically consists of two attitudes: *rationalité autocritique* and *recours à l’expérience*. The role of experience returns as the prime regulator of learning. Self-criticism based on reflection needs experimentation in order to be able to attain any learning worthy of this name, which means that we must analyse the complex process of learning the French language and of the instrumental use of grammar. This constraint imposed by Puren certainly cannot neglect the impact of new technologies which support an approach to language teaching/learning in relation to the complexity of the fluid, globalised society in which TICE (*Technologies de l’Information et de la Communication pour l’Enseignement* or *ICT in foreign language learning/teaching*) plays a fundamental role as a preferred

tools for acquiring authentic language. Underlying this approach are the *tâches* regulated by the principles of flexibility and adaptability.

The CEFR dedicates an entire chapter to the relationship between *tâches* and language learning [22] and highlights the extent to which these can motivate learners to acquire language skills and, at the same time, increase their self-esteem. The CEFR urges teachers to calibrate their interventions and to distinguish between authentic and purely didactic *tâches*. In any case, the learner should not only be involved but proactive in the creation of activities and customising them by adding a personal input. Underlying the proposed teaching methodology we once again find the concept of implicit learning as learners are concentrating on the form, i.e. the solution of the task, and they will thus have to make an instrumental use of the language without focusing on how it works. This may happen *a posteriori*, in a phase in which they will be asked to reflect on the language and to inductively identify the principle regulating how a particular grammar feature works. Accessing sense facilitates effective learning, which will hopefully be long-lasting. The *tâche* provides a further benefit: previously acquired knowledge/skills can be ‘recycled’ and used subconsciously. It should be stressed that the activities envisaged by the *tâches* include some significant features, such as those regarding error management [23]. The concrete fulfilment of specific tasks, in which each learner is free to make use of previously acquired knowledge/skills, passes through the stages of experimentation and induction before reaching a reflection on the various processes employed in order to solve the problem. This verification phase, which analyses the various stages that have led to the result, allows the learner to harness existing resources in order to acquire further knowledge and develop previously acquired skills.

4. TIC and TICE

In the language teaching world, grammar is widely held to be the feature that is most resistant to change and that does not lend itself to novel didactic approaches and especially not those based on electronic media. In actual fact, for many years we have witnessed the digitisation of traditional structural exercises (especially of the Skinner type) under the guise of something new. However, this novelty has concerned the medium, while the content and the practices have not undergone any great change.

And yet, the new media have considerably enhanced the acquisition of grammar structures through less tedious activities, often accompanied by images and, at least in more recent years, preceded by ‘real life’ situations [24]. The communicative approach has benefitted from the introduction of TIC (*Technologies de l’Information et de la Communication* or *ICT Information and Communication Technologies*) into the teaching world and a number of

sites have followed in the wake of the electronic version of Bescherelle [25], specifically for verb tenses, facilitating a widespread use of exercises meeting a variety of needs and available at a time of the learners' choosing. In short, a great many websites contribute to the acquisition of language by learners and to their reflection on the language they are encountering [26].

The first few years of the new millennium witnessed a growing importance being attributed to the relationship between sense and text [27] and, in particular, to the production of written and spoken communication with an increasing focus on reflection on the language. Naturally, this required linguists, computer experts and teaching professionals to work together for the very first time in order to codify structures, occurrences and co-occurrences with a view to analysing the language and providing the user-learner with the opportunity to try out new techniques for learning a continually evolving but not unattainable language. The lexis and grammar interact in a variety of new and different contexts, thus motivating the learner to experience the language.

The new media provide access to a huge variety of language activities that the paper-based hard copy simply cannot match. The studies of Maurice Gross [28] are deservedly acknowledged for overcoming the traditional separatist logic and bridging the gap between lexis and grammar [29] so as to facilitate the lexical construction of verbs included in Automatic Language Processing, which is essentially based on the lexis-grammar concept. These studies are on-going and facilitate associations between such categories as verbs and prepositions, which constitute a frequently encountered stumbling block for many learners. Although it follows traditional grammatical practices based on reduction, substitution, transformation, expansion, combination and so on, the grammar tree approach has ensured more dynamic learning and has offered users greater opportunities for a thorough reflection on the language and, in particular, on the grammar structures most closely linked to the context in which the structure is located.

However, thanks to the eclectic approach over the years we have become accustomed to never considering any feature as absolute but, instead, favouring constant experimentation. Specifically, ICTs are, by definition, never expected to be based on theories but fulfil their function only if they propose

des "outils" qui favorisent la production de textes ancrés dans des interactions verbales authentiques. La grammaire issue de cette démarche veut coller à la réalité du fonctionnement cognitif et social de la langue et ne se situe pas dans un cadre de linguistique théorique donné *a priori*. Il ne s'agit donc pas de dériver ou d'adapter une modélisation linguistique particulière [30].

This is the basis for many online activities, which can be

verified above all in their communicative performance without which any linguistic reflection proves to be self-referential. First and foremost, communication needs targeted and never decontextualized grammatical proposals, a cognitive framework of structural reflection which is flexible and does not aspire to becoming a new methodological approach.

It is well known that TICE resources provide a significant opportunity above all because their multimodal and hypertext features make them the preferred tools for learners to acquire a language through the association of text and utterances. Images, sounds, written and/or spoken language are presented simultaneously in situations and contexts that facilitate language acquisition and reflection on the grammar structures without the learner being aware that these processes are taking place. The *tâches* are presented holistically in genuine situations that, with the help of authentic materials, seem real. In this context, the learners enjoy a fully-fledged experience thanks to the opportunities made available by TICE and broaden their knowledge horizons considerably. Clearly, such practices can only enhance the learner's independence and responsibility in a framework of extending both the social and emotional aspects that are essential factors in ensuring effective and long-lasting learning and, as a result, a great deal of computer software exists to meet this need [31].

The communicative approach tout court seems to have entered a crisis due to the somewhat artificial situations regarding the *actes de parole*. The advent of the so-called action-oriented approach has, some say, overcome the limitation imposed by the communicative approach [32], and in this new perspective the class is considered to be a sort of micro-society in which all members of the group consider themselves to be second language users. The teacher's role lies in proposing situations inspired by everyday life which in turn makes it possible to create *bain de langue* simulations in real contexts. In order to achieve this, the use of TICE is indispensable in that direct and constant contact with new technologies allows a real situation, or *simulation globale*, to be more faithfully reproduced [33]. It is now more important than ever that learners be fully aware of the meaning of the work they are about to undertake and of the assignment given in the *tâche*. Indeed, each *tâche* calls for activities of comprehension and production in order to reach the required result and aims to involve the learner in the assimilation of language skills, the verification of which will take place in class. Task completion will generate feedback that will help learners to assess for themselves whether they have acquired any given structure fully, partly or not at all. Reference to the CEFR is obvious and natural as it tends to conjugate the action-oriented proposal with reflection on the language and on the meaning of the *acte de parole*.

Once again the phase in which the language structures are conceptualised is subordinate to the actions envisaged by the main objective: every language activity is a response

to a need of the learners that emerges from the context and satisfies the needs of the protagonists of the act itself. Thanks to the use of TICE, the individual and the group can be placed at the centre of the learning process whenever they formulate a concept. This feature is also considered to be a conceptualising action that implies, or should imply, the entire action-oriented path in the sense that there is a constant stimulus to reflect on how the language works without there being the risk of proposing a traditional grammar lesson. Every phase of the action-oriented approach is, by nature, geared towards conceptualisation in order to make learners independent so that they can progress from language acquisition to language appropriation. This takes place not in isolation but in a context that requires a proactive perspective as learners make progress when working and cooperating within a group. The action is never abstract but envisages a real action in a real context with real people.

How can this be achieved, given that space and time set objective limitations? TICE overcomes these by enabling real-time communication within and between any countries. One example of an online activity is the Babelweb project [34] which allows learners to take part in forums and blogs to discover how, through concrete actions, a language works. During the implementation of this project, learners acquire the language, put it into practice, observe and derive the structures, and acquire the skills that allow them to complete the project and thus grasp how the language works. The project envisages the possibility for the class group to be in contact with similar, perhaps external, groups in accordance with the social dimension laid down in the CEFR. Authentic materials have a particularly significant role to play in that they are indispensable: not only do they serve as examples but they also provide valid support for the project activities. In this framework, learners can also be part of a multilingual dynamic and thus progress from foreign language teaching to the multilingual teaching specified in the CEFR, without any separation or opposition between the two.

5. Conclusions

Electronic media are essential for multilingual teaching, but we cannot ignore the major difficulties that have emerged in the wake of the initial euphoria, which has sometimes dissolved into a lack of interest or been replaced by a merely instrumental view. In this connection, some recent studies, including those of Françoise Poyet and Christine Develotte [35], point out that improvisation and an excessive trust in ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in foreign language learning/teaching will not suffice to overcome the difficulties that the use of ICT entails. In particular, Maud Cielanski identifies mediation as the linchpin for the teaching of French as a foreign language in a multilingual context whose goal is to ensure

the learner is autonomous.

nous souhaitons revenir sur deux figures de la médiation caractéristique des apprentissages numériques : le tutorat et le conseil. Dans la mesure où l'accompagnement proposé par le tutorat est largement décrit et expliqué dans le champ de l'Alao, nous détaillerons ici uniquement la médiation du conseil. Le conseil est l'un des éléments constitutifs des dispositifs d'apprentissage en autodirection, qui comprend également un centre de ressources et un temps de travail autonome, éléments que l'apprenant articule à sa guise tout au long de son apprentissage. Le conseil est une médiation caractérisée par la centration sur l'apprenant. C'est ce dernier qui est le moteur du dispositif d'apprentissage [36].

We therefore see the emergence of two key figures who can contribute to the learning process by fostering a new approach to reflection on the language, on its structures and on how these work. The teacher could also act as a tutor, but an expert in specifically created online resources is also needed in order to perform the role of *conseiller dirigé* and thus enhance the central focus on the learner. Only in this way will it be possible for the learner to transform from a target into a human resource legitimised by reciprocal learning models. Two teaching principles enshrined in the CEFR will thus be ensured: the social and the multilingual aspects will be facilitated by ICT and their constant worldwide view [37].

Such an approach will succeed in combining an undeniably greater variety of knowledge and skills than in the most frequently adopted techniques and methods. This approach is based on the idea that the learner should reflect both on how the language works and on cultural aspects through careful and constant observation of the reality, they encounter thanks to the use of ICT and contact with other learners either face-to-face or online. Appropriate feedback and constant assessment of the phases of reflection on the language and the multilingual context generate critical and self-critical awareness of the amount of information received, of stimuli perceived and of new features presented. Such a process can only enhance the distancing of structured certainties, which frequently impede the learner and the learning process. One direct consequence of this may be a greater awareness of 'otherness' and of the inner workings of others, which coincides with the language-culture feature which the learner experiences and tends to acquire by adopting comparative and contrastive approaches [38] that are surprisingly useful in the acquisition of a 'real' language involving reflection on the contexts encountered and how the language works.

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