Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching
How to teach it, how to avoid our student's «Oh, no, not that again!»
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En sus intentos por seguir las líneas marcadas por los métodos de enseñanza más recientes, los profesores de lenguas extranjeras se han visto obligados a moverse de un extremo —basar su instrucción únicamente en ejercicios gramaticales— a otro —prescindir totalmente de la gramática, presuponiendo que el énfasis en el aspecto comunicativo del lenguaje daría cuenta de las estructuras y funciones gramaticales. Esta última aproximación nos lleva a caer en el frecuente peligro de realizar una actividad tras otra, ignorando en realidad cuál es el propósito que subyace a dichas actividades. En este artículo se ha tratado de buscar un marco metodológico que, sin renunciar a la dimensión comunicativa del lenguaje, nos permita asimismo concentrarnos es el aspecto formal. Tras un recorrido por algunos de los más representativos métodos de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, he llegado a la conclusión de que el método comunicativo es un enfoque que, respaldado por un sólido corpus teórico, nos ofrece la posibilidad de cultivar la competencia lingüística de nuestros alumnos, considerada ésta como parte integral de una competencia comunicativa de carácter más amplio.

1. Recent approaches to grammar

Having been a student of languages at a time when foreign languages were taught by means of repetitive, boring and dubiously effective drills, I have tried from the very beginning of my short career as a teacher of English to make my lessons more appealing and useful when the time to teach grammar comes. The task, however, has turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated. Having studied the different views about the role of grammar in the most recent approaches to second language teaching, I must admit my initial confusion when faced not only with the question of *how* to teach grammar, but with the more serious dilemma of *whether* to teach it or not. Such is the result of considering the different

—and sometimes opposing— views dealing with this issue. In fact, we can think of the importance assigned to grammar by the most representative approaches to language teaching as a continuum whose extremes would be held by Audiolingualism on the one hand and the Natural Approach on the other:

Audiolingualism _____Natural Approach

Drawing from Structuralism in linguistics and Behaviorism in psychology, Audiolingualism views language as a system of structurally related elements for the encoding of signs, the elements being phonemes, morphemes, words, structures and sentence types. Learning a language means, therefore, mastering the different blocks a language consists of, and learning the mechanisms by which these elements are combined, from phoneme to morpheme to word to phrase to sentence. Keeping this background in mind, it is easy to see that the grammatical system —a listing of grammatical elements and structures for the linear combination into words, phrases and sentences— becomes paramount in this method, its teaching through dialogues for memorization and drills being the basis of audiolingual classroom practice (Richards and Rodgers: 1986). This was, basically, the type of methodology used in the foreign language class from the late 1950's to the beginning of the 1970's.

At the other end of the continuum we find the so-called Natural Approach formulated by Krashen and Terrell in the early 1980's. Their theory is built upon five major hypotheses (1986: 23-51), only two of which are relevant to my purposes. I refer to the «acquisition-learning» hypothesis and to the «monitor» hypothesis. The first one claims that there are two distinctive ways of developing competence in a second or foreign language. On the one hand we have *acquisition*, which is the natural way, similar to first language development in children. Acquisition involves the naturalistic development of language proficiency through understanding language and through using language for meaningful communication. The knowledge we acquire is implicit. On the other hand we have *learning*, which refers to a process in which conscious rules about a language — that is, grammatical rules — are developed. It results in explicit knowledge about the forms of a language and the ability to verbalize this knowledge. Formal teaching is necessary in order for learning to occur, but it does not help acquisition. According to this theory, learning cannot lead to acquisition. In other words, we cannot master a foreign or second language through grammatical rules. This does

not mean, however, that grammar is completely neglected. Actually, it has a role, as the «monitor» hypothesis states: the only function of conscious learning is to act as a monitor or editor that checks and repairs the output of the acquired system. That is, when we produce utterances in a second language the utterance is initiated by the acquired system, and our conscious learning only comes into play later. Therefore, there is a place for grammatical explanation and stress on grammatical accuracy, but *it is not in the classroom*. Grammatical accuracy develops without the benefit of classroom time; communicative ability does not. That is why it is necessary to insist on communicative ability in the classroom.

Although there are other methods which follow the general lines of either of the two approaches described above (such as the traditional Grammar-Translation method or the Silent Way[1] in the first case, or the Direct Method, a clear antecedent of the Natural Approach), I have focused on these two as clearly representative of two major movements in second language research: one group promotes the importance of grammatical accuracy whereas the other stresses communicative competence, grammatical accuracy having only a minor or non-existent role. I would dare to say this has become one of the most controversial issues in second language teaching today, and extensive research is currently being done which tries to provide support for both schools of thought.

Those authors who support the importance of grammar argue that communicative approaches are appealing, but we cannot say they are based on actual evidence. What seems to be their most powerful argument is that a communicative approach can lead to a «broken ungrammatical, pidginized form of language beyond which students can never really progress» (Celce-Murcia and Hilles 1988: 2). That is, it can lead to «fossilized» forms (Higgs and Clifford 1982). Furthermore, the current model of communicative competence proposes the existence of grammar as a distinct construct independent of overall communicative competence, a construct we cannot set aside (Rea Dickins and Woods 1988: 625). Yet other scholars try to provide some evidence against the previous argument, holding that focusing on grammatical accuracy can be even counter-productive (Hammond 1988: 1-23, Ballman 1988:180-185).

At this very stage in the search for a suitable approach to grammar teaching, one can find oneself in a sort of dead-end situation: if an approach aimed at fluency is adopted, one runs the risk of helping students to acquire a kind of pidginized broken English, which may be effective communicatively speaking, but is very far from being accurate. If one insists only on grammatical accuracy —having as a motto the

behavioristic attitude that «what comes in, comes out»— it is very likely that students are completely unable to make themselves understood in the «real foreign language world.» Obviously enough, both goals —that is, accuracy and communicative fluency— are theoretically desirable, which means some type of eclectic, «in-between» position becomes necessary. In my search for an answer to my initial question, I have come to the conclusion that there exists an approach which, being communicative, does hold a place for the teaching of grammar in class, and that it is possible because the new conception developed by linguistics about the type of competence we must teach has brought about a transformation of what traditionally has been understood as «grammar». This approach is «Communicative Language Teaching» (CLT), to which I will devote the second part of this paper.

2. Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching

In order to understand the way in which this approach to language teaching views grammar, it would be convenient to analyze the theoretical and methodological backgrounds underlying this method. I will do so through using the scheme proposed by Richards and Rodgers (1986: 28) when describing language teaching methods. According to these scholars, we can study a method by establishing three levels of conceptualization: *approach*, which refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as a source of practices and principles in language teaching; *design*, which is the level where we consider issues related to syllabus and roles played by teachers, students and materials; and *procedures*, dealing with classroom techniques, practices and behaviours observed when the method is used.

The theoretical background supporting CLT develops as a reaction against Chomsky's theory of transformational-generative grammar. Let us recall Chomky's concept of an ideal native speaker who possesses *competence* —knowledge of the system of the language, that is, rules of grammar, vocabulary and the way the linguistic elements are combined to form acceptable sentences— and who puts such knowledge into practice, into *performance*. Chomsky's idea of grammar leaves no place for aspects such as the appropriateness of the performance or the context in which we use language. The idea that language is something other than rules and form resulted in a linguistic reaction developed

within the scope of the new linguistic paradigm we call *pragmatics*. Among the most outstanding protagonists of this movement we can mention Hymes, who modified Chomsky's dychotomy by expanding the notion of competence from one parameter —Chomky's grammaticality— to four: *grammaticality* —whether something is formally *possible*; *feasibility* —whether something is *feasible* in virtue of the means of implementation available; *appropriateness* —whether something is appropiate, adequate, happy, successful, in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated; and *what is actually done*. Furthermore, competence refers not only to the knowledge of these parameters but also to the ability to <u>use</u> that knowledge, because «there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless» (Hymes 1979: 15).

Halliday, in his turn, rejects Chomky's dychotomy —the only distinction that remains is that between the actual and the potential of what is an actualization (1978: 52). Halliday regards language as a tool for social action, since meaning is socially constrained, and it is not possible to mean without trying to do something that has a social cause. In spite of their different perspectives, both Hymes and Halliday propose a view of language that takes into account the sociological context. They both have reactions against a view of language as a structure and towards a view of language as communication, a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part. As a result of this work, in the early 1970's some linguists and researchers began to refer to *communicative competence* as a notion that was different from *grammatical* or *linguistic competence*. This concept was to innovate language teaching: if until that moment linguistic competence had been the goal of our teaching programs, it had become necessary to account for communicative competence (insisting on the meaningful content of classroom activities rather than on overt language learning), although in the beginning there was some confusion over the meaning and bounds of this term.

An issue of interest to all those linguists was some disagreement as to whether or not the notion of communicative competence should include grammatical competence as one of its components (Campbell and Wales 1970, Savignon 1972, Munby 1978, Canale and Swain 1980, Higgs and Clifford 1982). According to Munby, if communicative competence does not include the notion of grammatical competence we may run two risks: that they are taught separately (as has been the case so far) and that grammatical competence is not regarded as an essential component of communicative competence any more (in Omaggio 1986: 6). The key question could be stated like this: Is there any need to teach grammar in class?

According to the studies undertaken by some researchers, we can think of grammar as a distinct construct, independent from overall communicative competence. Rea Dickens and Woods (1988: 623-645) report a number of experiments carried out on this topic. Savignon (1972) investigated the effects of classroom training on the development of two traits: linguistic competence and communicative competence. Three groups of students (G1, G2, G3) received basic instruction in French using the audiolingual method. For an additional hour per week, G1 received special training in oral French communication skills, G2 was exposed to aspects of French culture and G3 attended extra audiolingual language laboratory classes. At the end of the semester, all students took two standarized tests of linguistic achievement and an oral communicative competence test. There was no significant difference among the groups on the test of linguistic competence or in the final grade, but there was a significant difference on the test of communicative competence, which can be interpreted as evidence for the distinctiveness of linguistic competence from communicative competence.

In their correlational study to investigate the communicative competence of Spanish-speaking pupils in bilingual education programs, Politzer and McGroarty (in Rea Dickins and Woods 1988: 626) found that there is an association between high linguistic and high communicative competence, since lower levels of the first are shown to be largely incompatible with high levels of the second. Furthermore, they even suggest the existence of a minimum low level of linguistic competence as a prerequisite for adequate communicative competence, and they point out that linguistic competence emerges as distinct from communicative competence, since the latter presupposes the former, but the reverse is not the case. Rea Dickins and Woods summarize in these words the tremendous importance of grammar in the foreign language class:

> ... we can say that grammar is the resource available to indicate a number of elements crucial to the appropriate and accurate interpretation of utterances: (a) the relationship between the participants in an interaction, (b) the topic being discussed, (c) the time of the event, (d) the mood of the utterance(s), and (e) the attitude taken by the speaker. Furthermore, within grammar, there is constant interaction that brings all these functions together to allow a full interpretation of the message. (1988: 632)

Therefore, we can say there seems to be a need to teach grammar, as Canale and Swain admit by reversing Hymes's statement quoted above:

«there are rules of language use that would be useless without rules of grammar» (1980: 5). That is the reason why they include grammatical competence in their model of communicative competence. This model comprises all four skills —listening, speaking, reading and writing. Drawing on other models, they propose an integrative view of communicative competence with four major components: *grammatical competence* includes knowledge of vocabulary, rules of pronunciation and spelling, word formation and sentence structure, that is, aspects related to the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code; *sociolinguistic competence* refers to the appropriate use of grammatical forms in different contexts, in order to convey specific communicative functions; *discourse competence* addresses the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought; and *strategic competence* involves the use of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to produce communication or to compensate for breakdowns in it. Needless to say these four components interact with each other and influence each other, something we should not forget in our foreign language class. Actually, the mere fact that grammar interacts with the three other constructs should make us think of grammar teaching in very different terms from the way it has traditionally been taught. Just as for Halliday and Hymes, we can only understand language if we relate it to extralinguistic phenomena, so it may be that we can only really teach language if we present and practice it in relation to the uses to which, as a communicative tool, it may be put. In this sense, R. Allwright (1979: 178) conceives linguistic competence as a construct that would be included in our communicative competence except for a a small part. Therefore, if we teach for communicative competence, we cater to all but a small part of linguistic competence, whereas the reverse is not the case. This is the reason why Allwright suggests that «if we really have communication as the major aim of our (language) teaching, we would be well advised to focus on communicative skills, in the knowledge that this will necessarily involve developing most areas of linguistic competence as an essential part of the product rather than focus on linguistic skills and risk failing to deal with a major part of whatever constitutes communicative competence» (1979: 168).

In my opinion, this shift in the focus of attention from the grammatical to the communicative properties of language has resulted in an apparent lack of interest in the grammatical components of language, as if the concepts of communication and grammar were naturally antonymous. In other words, the belief that focusing only on the

communicative aspect of language would also account for the grammatical construct has allowed many of those teachers who were disappointed with the tedious drills offered by Audiolingualism to carry out a different set of activities where there was no place for grammatical structures contemplated in isolation[2]. It seems to me that such a trend is evident in the field of *syllabus design* as developed by some representatives of CLT. Johnson (1982a: 135-143) reports on an experiential type of syllabus, the so-called «procedural» or «task-based» syllabus undertaken by N. S. Prabhu in India in 1979. It involves the abolition of any kind of linguistic syllabus. What we call «units of organization» are simply tasks which are graded conceptually and grouped by similarity. The content of the lesson is thus planned in terms of the task or activity it will involve, for «if we impose a semantic or structural syllabus on classroom language, we are taking away the teacher's and students' freedom to interact in a way natural to the task in hand» (Johnson 1982a: 136)[3]. It is true that several disadvantages inherent in the traditional grammatical syllabuses (lack of applicability, reduction of motivation in those who need to see immediate results, failure to provide the necessary conditions for the acquisition of communicative competence, etc.) had led Wilkins to propose in the early 70's the *notional syllabus*, intended to «provide the means by which a certain minimum level of communicative ability in European languages can be set up» (1979a: 86). A notional syllabus consists of two types of categories: the semantico-grammatical categories, which account for the grammatical content of learning, and the categories of communicative function, which relate the functions of the utterances and the grammatical categories through which these functions are realized, as well as reflecting the speaker's intentions and attitudes. We must not forget, however, that despite the emphasis on the communicative aspect of language learning, Wilkins seems to be aware of the importance assigned to grammar and claims that the most valuable contribution of such a syllabus is in the provision of a Minimum Adequate Grammar —that is, a knowledge of the grammatical system of a language sufficient to meet urgent communicative needs— for learners following short-term courses (1979b: 98). With reference to the «procedural syllabus» we mentioned above, Johnson (1982a: 141) wonders if that syllabus can in practice avoid the linguistic specification that characterizes other types of syllabuses. As this seems to be rather unavoidable at some stage, he claims that a revised version of the notional-functional syllabus might do the same as the «procedural syllabus.»

        To my mind, it is not in the field of syllabus design, but in that of methodology —*procedure* in our terms— where CLT has been

revolutionary. This means we can establish a difference between syllabus design solutions to what Johnson (1979: 192) calls «communicative incompetence» and methodological ones, this distinction being the same as that resulting from focusing on the *language needs* of particular groups of learners or taking their *learning needs* as the starting point of our approach. It is in the latter factor where the key for an adequate use of grammar teaching lies.

We can illustrate this idea by quoting Johnson when —in accordance with Wilkins' opinion— he argues that it may be a mistake to use a functional syllabus at a zero beginner level, because «a functional organization automatically implies structural disorganization» (1982b: 106). His proposal is that a beginners' course may be designed structurally and at the same time incorporate many valuable features associated with a communicative approach to language teaching. That is, by improving some of the disadvantages inherent in structural syllabuses and by keeping some of their advantages, we can methodologically make a syllabus communicative. Taking the question «What do our students want to use the language for?» as a starting point, we can use only those structures and vocabulary that are useful for our students; we can look for situations where those structures can be used appropriately[4]. Furthermore, we can present those structures by means of communicative practice. We tend to think that the adoption of a grammatical design automatically implies the use of those repetitive, boring, and dubiously effective drills I referred to at the beginning, something apparently incompatible with the most general idea of communicative practice, that is, encouraging the student to say whatever he wants to say in the second or foreign language, with a minimum of control. And yet, the revolution carried out in the field of methodology has proved that by means of very simple procedures, it is possible to turn traditional drills into more communicative ones, which allows us to keep paying attention to grammatical functions and structures within the scope of a communicative framework (Johnson 1980: 156, 1982c: 163-175). Taking the students' learning needs as a basis, Johnson even suggests the possibility of elaborating a syllabus with more than one type of unit of organization, such as functions, settings, or notions. It is what he calls a *multi-dimensional syllabus* (1982d: 55).

Once we have partly analysed the theoretical corpus underlying the Communicative Approach to language teaching, we can better understand Celce-Murcia's (1985:1) practical specification of the role of grammar in communicative language teaching: the inclusion of grammar in our classroom activities should be the result of a decision, and our decision as to whether to teach it or not must be in its turn the result of

taking into account a number of factors, such as *learner* and *instructional variables*. According to these variables, focus on form will be more or less important, as this grid summarizes:

Less _____Focus on form _____**More**
Important   **Important**

Learner
Variables

1. **Age**	children	adolescents	adults
2. **Level**	beginner	intermediate	advanced
3. **Educat.**	pre-literate	semi-literate	literate
	no formal	some formal	well educated
	education	education	

Instructional
Variables

4. **Skill**	listening	speaking	writing	reading
5. **Register**	informal	consultative	formal	
6. **Need/Use**	survival	vocational	professional	communication

The more factors we identify on the left side of the grill, the less important it is to focus on form; analogically, the more factors we identify on the right, the more important it is to focus on form. We can also establish such a distinction about the different ways to focus on form:

Less _____Ways to focus on form _____**More**
Effective   **Effective**

manipulative drills	communicative activities
context-free practice	context-embedded practice
sentence-based exercises	text-based exercises
cognitively undemanding activities	cognitively demanding activities
contrived materials	authentic materials
dull or neutral content	interesting, motivating content

What the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching has shown us is that it is possible to practice a grammatical structure remaining on the right hand side of the grid. If we keep in mind that the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching is a learner-centered method, in the sense that the input and feedback from the learners influences the development of the syllabus, the learning pace, the contents and objectives, there is no doubt about the fact that this method's position as far as grammar teaching is concerned is absolutely coherent with such a flexible standpoint.

3. Conclusions

After analysing the way the most recent methods in language teaching approach grammar, I have come to the conclusion that there is no definite answer to my initial question as to whether we should teach grammar in class: it is not a matter of suscribing categorically to the principle «Grammar Yes» or «Grammar No», but of considering a number of factors such as our students' learning needs, together with other learner and instructional variables.

In this respect, I find the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching a very adequate and flexible frame of reference. If we go back to the continuum mentioned above which indicated the importance assigned to grammar by the most recent approaches to language teaching, we could say CLT holds an intermediate position:

Audiolingualism_____Communicative _____Natural
                        Approach   Approach

Unlike recent trends that condemn grammar teaching to a minor or non-existing role, and unlike those past tendencies that based the content of the foreign language class only on grammar, the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching admits that grammar is a construct in itself, although it belongs to the overall construct we call communicative competence. Communicating as far as possible, and with all available resources, is our goal. But focus on meaning does not imply a complete abandonment of form. If we decide that they are necessary, drills are welcome as a way of reinforcing the previous communicative activities. If

this is the case, there are some principles that can turn a drill into a communicative type of exercise, without neglecting our stress on form.

It seems to me that at a time when there is increasing demand for acquiring the communicative ability to make oneself understood in a foreign language, the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching also offers us, teachers and learners, the chance to pay attention to a part of language teaching and learning that may be «victimized» if we come too close to the right hand end of our continuum.

NOTES

1. Although this method has a rather skeptical view of the role that a linguistic theory can play in language teaching methodology, the materials used and the sequence in which they are presented (on the basis of grammatical complexity) make us think of a structural approach: the sentence is the basic unit of teaching, language is organized into sentences by grammatical rules, it is separated from context and taught in artificial situations with no communicative value (Richards and Rodgers: 101).

2. In this respect, a very recent phenomenon catches our attention: the huge demand for games, simulation and other types of communicative materials specifically designed for the ELT market is not always accompanied by a valid and coherent explanation of their use in language teaching situations, within a clear methodological frame of reference. Too often we really do not know why we choose a particular game or whether it is a valid language learning activity.

3. The hypothesis underlying such an experiment is that by means of these activities the student will extend —not activate— his repertoire of structures, although a long period of «incubation» may be necessary. This idea, which reminds us of the «silent period» proposed by Krashen and Terrell, is one of the shortcomings of this project, in the sense that its success, if any, could only be based on long-term results, this being a rather costly solution.

4. We may recall Widdowson's dychotomy *use/usage* and its enormous applicability to language teaching (1978: 1-21).

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