Student-Centred Grammar
Learning and Teaching
Preface

There are times in life and in our professional careers as teachers when we are faced with challenges that can throw us completely out of our comfort zone and can take us beyond our imagination. There are times when we are engaged in “pedagogical soul searching” looking for new ways to respond to teaching challenges and to engage our students with what we know, looking for new ways to grow as practitioners.

This book narrates my long journey, as a teacher researcher, being vulnerable, being risky, being innovative, being equal, being stubborn, being reflective, searching for answers and travelling with my fellow students and colleagues into teaching and learning spaces where grammar teachers and students have never been before. And beyond that, this journey relates to one more state of "being", being wrong. It is one of the very best ways to learn.

This book was born out my desire to respond to my students' pleas for an easier, more effective way to learn grammar. It required me to step away from my “teaching comfort zone”, the traditional grammar learning models to which I had been exposed during my training to be a teacher in Spain and the UK, and to reconcile teaching Second Language (L2) grammar with my communicative views of language learning and teaching. Most of all, I wanted to empower my students to take grammar learning into their own hands, by making this a communicative, student-centred and social learning process. Thus, in a sense, I started the teaching journey described here—the longest continuous longitudinal study in this area, according to one of the world's leading experts on pedagogical grammar, Professor Leo Van Lier—from the point where it ended.

It is only now, in these final moments of preparing this book, as I look back and see the seven years of my teaching invested in this teacher researcher journey, that I can gain a real sense of my own evolution as a grammar teacher,
as well as the grammar learning evolution of my students. I now realize how
different this teaching research journey would have been if the knowledge and
wisdom that I gained from it had been available in the first place. But I guess as
the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, said “Caminante no hay camino, se hace el
camino al andar” [Walker, no road is available, you make the road as you walk
alone]. This is the story of the road that I built with the help of all my language
learners, colleagues, great educational and applied linguistics researchers, and
my daughter, Emma. It is to all of them that this book is dedicated, because
without them, it would have not been born. It is also dedicated to those of you,
teachers and researchers, who wonder if one day you could make a difference to
our pedagogical landscape. I hope that you will find some inspiration in this
book, because this is the evidence that inside of every reflective teacher
researcher, there is a pedagogical secret to better learning waiting to be
unlocked.

Finally, I would like just to acknowledge that writing this book has been a
great learning opportunity for me, both as a teacher, as a researcher and as a
human. I have grown in ways that I could never have previously imagined, and I
now realize that the main outcome of this study has been my development as a
reflective practitioner. It is clear now that this book is not an end result, but
another stage of the exploratory journey in which I have been engaged since I
started teaching grammar to my advanced Spanish students in the second
semester of 1996. Even though the period reported in this book ended some
time ago, the journey continues.

Cristina Poyatos Matas
Chapter 1
Introduction

Every problem has a gift for you in its hands
— Richard Bach

In the last forty years the role of grammar in the second-language classroom has changed dramatically. Grammar has moved from being of central importance in the grammar-translation method to being almost ignored in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, and then re-emerging as an important focus in more recent work. In the 1980s there was widespread discussion among researchers and practitioners concerning whether to even teach grammar (Celce-Murcia, 1985). But by the 1990s, the grammar debate had shifted from whether to teach grammar to how to provide more effective grammar pedagogy that can integrate grammar and communicative language learning (Sheer, 2002). As part of this shift, language teachers were encouraged to search for meaningful ways of approaching grammar learning and teaching in the communicative classroom (Doughty & Williams, 1998), but in the process, the potential of what some may regard as ‘old-fashioned’ rules has not been entirely lost (Scheffler & Criciuta, 2010).

In the same way that views in the field concerning the role of grammar have evolved, so has my own approach to grammar in my Spanish language teaching practices. In a way, I have lived the grammar debate in my own personal experience as a Spanish as a Second Language teacher in Australia. I was initially trained in the early 80s as a Spanish teacher in Spain, learning about the importance of grammar in language instruction and studying it in a traditional manner. In the late 80s and early 90s I did graduate study in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in England. At this time, I
learnt about Krashen’s theories and how grammar teaching might in fact be detrimental to language acquisition. Krashen’s views in particular, and the CLT approach in general, had a very strong influence on my own teaching. I was, in Clyne’s term, an “antigrammar language teacher” (Clyne, 1996). Later, in the mid-1990s, when I started to teach advanced Spanish to university students in Australia, my CLT beliefs started to waver in the face of growing demands by my students for grammar instruction.

This book is a narrative account of a grammar-teaching journey that began at that time. It is a journey in which I sought to develop a student-centred approach to grammar learning that would be genuinely communicative, while at the same time meet student needs for the development of structural knowledge of the language. Described here is my journey over six years from being a communicative antigrammar teacher to one that seeks to empower students over their own grammar learning process. The early stages of this process were marked by a tension I felt between the grammar instruction that my students wanted and the communicative language teaching principles in which I believed. As I began to reconcile these two forces, my views on grammar teaching and learning changed. I realized that grammar learning and communication could not be successfully integrated unless the focus of grammar pedagogy shifted from the teaching of grammar to the learning of grammar, that is, from the teacher to the student, and in the pedagogy became what Cullen (2008) calls a “liberating force”. I also became aware of how little I really knew about grammar pedagogy, and how limited the grammar teaching options presented in the pedagogical literature really were.

The narrative in this book stretches from the second semester of 1996 to the first semester of 2002, spanning ten semesters and the experiences of ten groups of advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language in an Australian university. The development and implementation of the different stages of the student-centred grammar learning environments are described here in detail. The process drew heavily on insights from Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) and Reflective Learning (RL) theories, and the roles these play are described. The ongoing development of the grammar-learning environment was directly shaped by the participation and feedback of the students. This process is documented in detail, as is my response to the student comments and my own reflections.

What will be evident in the course of the narrative is the steady movement from teacher-centred grammar teaching to student-centred grammar learning. At the beginning, when trying to respond to student demands for grammar learning, I instinctively used a traditional approach to grammar teaching, in which I was the main decision maker and in complete control of the learning process. Over the course of time I continually relinquished more and more control, with students coming to take centre stage in their own grammar learning. The active participation of students in their grammar learning was promoted by having them take the role of a Spanish grammar ‘researcher’—rather than students or teachers. Learners were encouraged to become more aware of their own grammar needs and the challenges they encountered in learning Spanish grammar. Central to the creation of the grammar learning environment was the grammar learning portfolio in which the students documented their grammar learning experiences and outcomes. The creation of the portfolio encouraged students to become more communicative and autonomous grammar learners. The development of the portfolio also promoted the use of problem-based, peer-assisted grammar learning in and outside the class. This on-going process of development culminated in a student-centred grammar learning environment that I have named the Reflective Autonomous Grammar Learning Approach (RAGLA).

The book, as the reader may gather, is a series of action research case studies (Zuber-Skerritt, 1993). This was found to be the best research methodology for the undertaking, for two reasons. Firstly, because the study aimed to change grammar learning by approaching it in a communicative and reflective way, it was a process that was carried out under constant observation and evaluation, which is action research. Secondly, because it used data obtained from single classes of students participating over a long period of time, it constitutes a series of case studies. Moreover, evocative narrative has been used to describe the research findings, as it permits the participant teacher to
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bring all the components of this longitudinal educational experience together (Rener, 2001). Naturalistically elicited data were gathered through various methods. The data come from two primary sources consisting of student questionnaires and student interviews, and two secondary sources in the form of student grammar learning portfolios and articles related to the historical development of grammar teaching approaches.

The book begins with a discussion of grammar teaching and learning theories in Chapter 2. Here I identify key issues including the role that grammar might play in the development of L2 proficiency, and the role that grammar learning might play in the language class. Chapter 3 discusses student-centred learning approaches to learning and assessment, specifically PBL, PAL, RL and Student Learning Portfolios. Here, I introduce the eight learning conditions that Egbert, Chao and Hanson-Smith (1999) believe support optimal classroom learning, e.g. “learners have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning” (p. 3). These conditions will serve as the framework for discussing the student-centred approach developed here. The development of the student-centred grammar-learning environment is described in Chapters 5 to 14, with each chapter covering one semester. For each semester I describe the process, procedures, and materials used to create a student-centred grammar learning environment. Student responses to the unit are elicited through questionnaires and, in several semesters, by interview. These responses are presented and discussed in each chapter. Where needed, modifications to the approach are made in light of student feedback and my own experience. Finally, in Chapter 15, I pull together the findings using the Egbert et al (1999) framework. The original eight conditions are expanded to include two new ones, with the ten conditions providing a robust framework for describing the student-centred grammar learning approach I have developed.

This study advances our knowledge of L2 grammar pedagogy and establishes a basis for further research into promoting meaningful and autonomous grammar learning in communicative classrooms. Even though the approach has been developed in a foreign language-learning context with tertiary students, I believe the student-centred grammar learning environment developed here has the potential to be implemented in other learning and teaching contexts. An international survey with 17 million teenagers from 32 countries found that two-thirds of their teenagers were bored in class, a reflection, at the very least, of a poor fit between the students of the 21st century and the classroom of the 21st century. I emphasise that I am not focusing on the students’ concerns only. When it comes to language instruction, the view that ‘grammar is boring’ is often shared by teachers and students alike (Andrews, 2003; Fitch, 1995). This book describes an approach that can cut through the crisis.
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