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9 June 2019

Intro to the Special Issue:
“Research on L1 grammar in schooling: on the crossroads with many paths”

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In this special issue we consider grammar instruction as a fundamental element in Language Education in Language Arts (i.e. the teaching and learning of a first language, or L1), which can be viewed as a territory nurtured with contributions from Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology, Literature, and Pedagogy. First, linguistic models can be underpinned by different psychological theories, which in turn can draw differently on the social dimension of humankind and therefore unequivocally trigger different conceptions of what languages are, how they are acquired, the role a social dimension plays in it, etc. This affects the way language is dealt with in schooling, contributing with different (and at times opposite) pedagogic theories as well as teaching and learning material and criteria to choose the most valuable content. This may also result in different perspectives on how to conduct research on language education.

Indeed, the history of studies on L1 and on language education shows us that diversity of perspectives is the norm. And yet, as language educationalists we need to work towards a sort of a common ground, albeit not so much in the sense of narrowing down the scope to a single and coherent viewpoint. While the state of a permanent debate in L1 language education has been observed at times from the lenses of a “crisis” (which would suggest the idea of “change of state”), Bronckart (2008) suggests the term “self-structuring” crisis, to reflect on the idea that the horizon might not be coherence after turbulence but what we could call a multiplicity of voices in an on-going debate among views in tension permanently under scrutiny and confronted to the enduring complexity of L1 language education.

Grammar, as a part of L1 language education, cannot be withdrawn from such a debate, especially given the prominence of grammar in educational curricula since the early 2000’s (cf. Locke, 2010; Chen and Myhill, 2016; Boivin et al. 2018). Indeed, the educational game always falls around the three poles of the so-called “didactic system”, namely teaching procedures, learning processes and teaching-learning contents. This means that, while L1 grammar in schooling is on the crossroads of many paths and possibilities, these three poles (which can be approached on their own or in connection with one another) serve as an overarching common ground to map not only educational intervention but also research (Fontich and Camps, 2014).

In this special issue we do not have any pretension to overcome differences and tensions (such pretension could lead in fact to eventually cancel the debate). Rather we aspire to draw into the pedagogic system as a framework for adopting different (and sometimes incommensurable) viewpoints to language and language education. The seven papers included in this Special Issue reproduce such aspiration.

Some stress the nature of grammar content, albeit not entirely dismissing the teaching procedures that such content may trigger. Some others locate their focus somewhere in the middle, exploring from different perspectives a “content / teaching and learning” two-way street, reflecting on how institutional resources affect assessment procedures. Finally, some locate their interest in the interplay between writing and grammar, albeit from different and even opposite approaches: the epistemic role of writing in learning grammar, the role of sentence-level grammar knowledge in enhancing writing skills, and the teaching procedures as mediational devices straddling grammar and writing. Some draw on grammar knowledge on its own, as what Hulshof (2013) dubs a “non-instrumental, cultural approach”, without necessarily going into further connections with language use, emphasizing the need for students’ increase of general language awareness. For some others, grammar and language use go hand in hand. These perspectives on grammar teaching have often been presented as opposites, although in our view, they are far from incompatible (cf. Ribas, Fontich & Guasch, 2014; Van Rijt, De Swart & Coppen, 2018).

The papers in this special issue address different states of affairs, problems, and even styles as they come from different academic traditions, educational jurisdictions and linguistic domains (France, United States, Portugal, Francophone Switzerland, and Québec). They were presented as communications in the “III International Conference on Teaching Grammar” hosted in Barcelona in January 2019. While the seven papers represent different approaches and focus on different issues, there is a common thread that crosses them through, and which we could call reflective or metalinguistic practices. Indeed, they all seem to approach grammar teaching with the aim to expand the apprentices’ resources for reflecting on the language. Without such resources, certain uses (e.g., formal writings), and the possibility for a non-spontaneous and articulated reflection on such a fascinating element of humankind as languages might not be possible. This approach can help us to shape pedagogical practice and research focused on the reflective processes of the learners.

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