Reflections about Grammar and its Role in Applied Linguistics: introduction to the RBLA thematic issue on grammar teaching and learning

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Grammar can be seen under different gazes whenever its teaching and learning are considered. Just like a polyhedron, grammar is multifaceted and each one of its faces can open a door to intense debate and challenging questions. Added to this complexity there is the fact that all involved in language education, be it its direct agents or not, have an opinion about the role of grammar in the linguistic education of different types of learners. On one extreme there are those who regard grammar teaching as a most decisive symptom of a quasi-malignant methodological anachronism; on the other extreme there are those who definitely regard as very suspicious, if not ostensively horrific, any educational proposal or program which advocates its vanguardism through allegations about the final demise of grammar teaching. However, in our view, the teaching and learning of grammar constitute a complex array of variables which is not reducible to extreme dichotomies, and is by its very nature, a natural issue to be examined by Applied Linguistics. This is, therefore, the reason why we take great pleasure in introducing our readership to this thematic issue of the Brazilian Journal of Applied Linguistics (RBLA).

The great deadlocks associated to grammar teaching are surely connected to its subjacent political dimension which can be traced back to language standardization. As far as the teaching of Portuguese in Brazil is concerned, the standardization issue brings us back to the grammatical tradition that enjoyed its intellectual hegemony even before the instauration of the first Linguistics circles in Brazilian academic environments. This tradition, adequately named Traditional Grammar, was and still is responsible for the normalization of a prestigious linguistic standard perceived as the high Portuguese variety in Brazil. According to Mattos e Silva (1989, p. 12), "this Grammar tried to establish rules

considered to be the best for the written text, based on the use made of it […] by its 'better' users, the so-called 'great writers'."[1] In the realm of foreign language teaching, this political dimension assumes particularly hot hues when the language concerned is English due to its status as an international communication code, well recognized by many. This status has been for some time now the focus of an intense debate in which there is a clear antagonism between two stances: on the one hand that which defends the normalization of English as a second and foreign language based on common elements found in its native varieties, and on the other hand a stance that sustains a pluricentric perspective open to emerging 'Englishes' generated by users with ethnic heritages other than the Anglo-American cultural matrix.[2]

The debate surrounding the maximally shared norm based on native speaker community norms and the pluricentric view find in Seargeant (2009) an interesting reflection. The author proposes that both views are oriented by democratic educational ideals, since the former is based on the social mobility and free access to means ethos rooted on a standardized view of linguistic models, while the latter is centered on the equal rights of non-hegemonic cultural identities. We assess Seargeant's (2009) views as relevant and very to the point; furthermore we see the issues raised by the author mirrored in the Portuguese grammar teaching debate in Brazilian schools. The paradox presented illustrates the fact that grammar teaching and learning does not settle for easy answers and cannot be resolved by the emulation of ideological mottos.

The issues related to grammar teaching and learning in native and nonnative language education are not, however, exhausted by their political and sociolinguistic consequences. Any decision making related to this theme in the school environment should be instructed by cognitive issues as well. In the English as a second or foreign language teaching circles it seems that Stephen Krashen's ideas are still very popular with teachers. That linguist's ideas are subsumed by his "monitor model" (KRASHEN, 1985) which present as its central tenant input exposure as a *sine qua non* condition for second language

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[1] Our translation for: "essa gramática procurou estabelecer as regras, consideradas as melhores, para a língua escrita, com base no uso que dela faziam [...] os seus mais 'bem acabados' usuários, os chamados 'grandes escritores'". The Editors.

[2] The debate surrounding the normalized versus the pluricentric views of English goes back to Quirk and Kachru whose original papers can be found in Seidlhofer (2003).

acquisition. Furthermore, Krashen claimed that explicit form instruction was not simply innocuous but also harmful to language learners. Krashen's strong bias stimulated a large body of research about the role of formal instruction in the acquisition of nonnative languages which interestingly enough ended up raising conclusions in disagreement with their original hypothesis (cf. ELLIS, 2008).

However, the cognitive value of explicit grammar instruction underlies other equally relevant issues. One of these is related to the choice of explicit instruction strategies, since undoubtedly anyone who decides to teach grammar is immediately faced with the challenge of choosing how to teach it. Here, again, nontrivial issues arise. The misconception that sees grammar teaching as a set of little rules and recipes fails at once, shaken by the very fact that that rule formulation is very far from a simplistic chore. In order for a rule to be formulated with the necessary descriptive power and generalization robustness and, at the same time, be pedagogically adequate for the specific learners' groups it will be taught, it requires a depth of grammar understanding that apparently remains an ideal far from the current linguistics research agenda achievements (cf. WESTNEY, 1994; VILELA, 2009).

Recently, pedagogical approaches to grammar teaching that go beyond the limits imposed by metalinguistic labeling have been proposed, therefore avoiding the fragility sometimes observed in attempts to reconcile descriptive and didactic goals joined under the same guise. Among these possibilities, we mention the numerous studies that incorporate electronic corpora to teaching (cf. ST. JOHN, 2001; YOON, 2008) and to the development of pedagogical tasks that highlight the correlations between discourse use dimensions and contingencies and their support in the linguistic system (cf. ELLIS, 2003). Despite the encouraging results that have been obtained under this line of research, several empirical questions about these pedagogical possibilities remain unexamined, such as for example, if they can be adequate for all teaching and learning contexts despite their specificities. For instance, would they work well in the Brazilian context, and if not, which adaptations should be sought and on which bases? Yet, other issues that could be explored relate to the success or lack of success achieved through these approaches if learners cognitive, sociocognitive and affective profiles are taken into consideration. Finally, the transposition of strategies taken from second and foreign language teaching corpora investigations to first language teaching should be grounds for a fruitful empirical investigation.

Exploring some of the questions posited in the discussion above, in this issue the RBLA features eight articles and a book review. The articles are grouped under the following three themes: focus on form second language grammar teaching investigations, innovations in grammar teaching and Portuguese grammar teaching.

Under the first theme, Finger and Vasques analyze the role of explicit instruction in the learning of the Present Perfect by Brazilians through an experimental approach in a school environment. The authors conclude that the explicit teaching of the form is beneficial to the learning process since students submitted to it did better than those who did not take the experimental instructional treatment. The second article, by Marques, discusses the role played by attention redirecting in the acquisition of concessive connectives by adult English L2 learners. The results found indicate that there was a considerable improvement in the acquisition process guided by raising learners' awareness about forms.

In the second thematic block there are two articles pertaining to grammar teaching innovation. In the first one, Aparício investigates grammar teaching innovation in the didactic practice of seven public school teachers. The author concludes that albeit making use of different activities and methodologies, the teachers researched present shared answers to innovation demands. In the second article, Dutra and Sileros propose the use of corpus linguistics methodologies to foster second language acquisition. The authors discuss the occurrence of bundles with *for* in college students' argumentative writing and suggest pedagogical activities related to the finding out of linguistic patterns which emerge from corpora in order to help students' learning.

The third and last thematic block focuses on the teaching of Portuguese grammar in the four articles presented. In the first article, Angelo puts forth a historiographic study about Portuguese grammar teaching in Brazil in the decades of 1950, 1960 and 1970. The author concludes that during that time interval far from being homogeneous, grammar teaching enjoyed diversity, therefore not confirming the idea that traditional grammar teaching was the only possibility then. The second article, by da Silva, investigates Portuguese grammar teaching in present day high schools and concludes that there is the coexistence of diversified approaches and methodologies adopted by teachers at this level. Da Silva, Pilati and Dias, in the third article in this series, discuss the overcoming of traditional conceptions about language and language

teaching, looking for new teaching methodologies and the remodeling of contents to be taught. The last article, by Gonçalves, Saito and Nascimento, focuses on approaches related to context-based language teaching and propose a didactic model based on a specific social practice in the search for teaching materials rooted linguistically and discursively on the functioning of language.

RBLA 10:4 is closed by the book review by Viana about Anderson & Corbett (2009) which explores English through online corpora and brings attention to a very relevant topic in current applied linguists' research agenda.

In order to conclude this introduction we would like to mention a missing topic from the many explored in this volume. It is the study of grammar acquisition *stricto sensu*, that is, investigations focusing on the organization and activation of learners' internalized grammatical knowledge, which potentially formats a speaker's natural use of language. This gap suggests that this might be a research area still little studied in Brazil despite its vigor in other countries. If our perception is accurate, before we invite the readers to explore the articles in this volume, we would like to suggest that future studies might be developed in this area that certainly has interesting contributions to offer to language education in Brazil.

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