

# Teaching & Learning Guide for: “L1 Grammar Instruction and Writing: Metalinguistic Activity as a Teaching and Research Focus”

Xavier Fontich

Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain)

This guide accompanies the following article:

Fontich, X. (2016). ‘L1 Grammar instruction and writing: Metalinguistic activity as a teaching and research focus’. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 10(5), 238–254. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12184>.

## 1 | AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Some authors have noted a lack of conceptual clarity in the field of L1 grammar instruction for writing. Here “metalinguistic activity” is proposed as a concept that can contribute conceptual clarity by relating metalinguistic activity both to the reflexivity that language affords (i.e., using language to refer to language itself) and to a sociocultural approach to languages (i.e., languages as semiotic tools that underpin our psychological development). I discuss how this notion is approached by *Grup de Recerca sobre Ensenyament i Aprenentatge de Llengües* (GREAL), the Research Group on Teaching and Learning Languages at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), and describe their seminal study of secondary students' metalinguistic activity in the context of writing. Results show that metalinguistic activity emerges at different levels (procedural, with common language, and with metalanguage). While it may not lead to students automatically writing better texts, metalinguistic activity does help them to engage in sustained discussion about text choices in the context of text production, something considered of the utmost importance in educating good writers. In conclusion, I indicate the theoretical relevance of this concept and suggest the need for more research on how to implement it effectively in the classroom. The teaching and learning guide extends the article's scope by presenting ideas on how to promote metalinguistic activity in the classroom as a source for grammar knowledge.

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2018 The Author(s) *Language and Linguistics Compass* © 2018 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

## 2 | THE AUTHOR RECOMMENDS

**Camps, A. and Milian, M. (eds) (2000). *Metalinguistic activity in learning to write*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.**

The purpose of this volume is to emphasize the relationship between written composition and metalinguistic activity. The studies presented assume that there is an interrelation between the act of writing and conscious knowledge, and control of text production and verbal processes. The main question they raise is “How can knowledge-of-language-and-discourse and writing competence be integrated?” To answer this question, they focus on the need to know whether and how this knowledge of language and discourse appears in the composition process, whether and how other types of knowledge appear, which type of knowledge this is, and how it is made conscious and controlled. The editors of the volume assume that the activating of knowledge of language and discourse and awareness of the processes, which are carried out, allow control of the production. Hence, the focus of the chapters is to obtain deeper insights into the processes involved in the teaching and learning of written language. Of special significance is the introduction to the volume, which includes a brief account of how the notion of “metalinguistic” has been considered in the various domains in which it has been used (linguistics, psychology, and psycholinguistics); it also offers a general overview of research devoted to the study of “metalinguistic activity.”

**Ribas, T., Fontich, X., and Guasch, O. (eds) (2014). *Grammar at school: Metalinguistic activity in language education*. Brussels: Peter Lang.**

The studies in this volume are centered on primary and secondary education and are focused on specific grammar issues in Subject Spanish and Subject Catalan, while adopting a general perspective on how grammar knowledge is built (i.e., on pupils' metalinguistic activity). The two introductory chapters explore basic questions in language teaching such as “How do usage-based linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic knowledge relate to each other?” and “Which linguistic content is suitable for learning language and using it?” These two chapters, along with the rest of the volume, consider that the teaching procedures brought into the classroom, as well as the need to conceptualize the grammar system as an organic entity resulting from the integration of form, meaning, and speakers' intentions, are paramount. They maintain that grammatical knowledge requires a systematic approach that makes it possible to create coherent frameworks into which declarative and procedural knowledge can be organized. This underscores the fact that mastery of these uses is impossible without a reflective capacity towards language systems and how they can be used. See also by Guasch, “Interlinguistic Reflection on Teaching and Learning Languages” (*Teaching Languages in a Multilingual Context*, pp. 15–30, Arnau ed, Multilingual Matters, 2013).

**Fontich, X. and García-Folgado, M.J. (2018). *Grammar instruction in the Hispanic area: The case of Spain with attention to empirical studies on metalinguistic activity*. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 18, 1–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2018.18.04.02>**

This paper contributes to a special issue “Working on grammar at school in L1 education: Empirical research across linguistic regions.” While research results as well as research questions on grammar instruction show considerable variety (across countries, linguistic areas, educational jurisdictions, and regions), to date, studies recognizing and exploring such diversity have been scarce. Thus,

the special issue is intended to provide a stimulus for further research on the subject and a starting point for the dissemination of local research. Each contribution consists of a review of existing empirical research in the respective region (Anglophone, Francophone, Germanophone, and Hispanic), which is amplified by considering future directions for research from the viewpoint of the author's research program. Contributing authors are Debra Myhill, Marie-Claude Boivin, Reinold Funke, and Xavier Fontich/María-José García-Folgado. The latter initially present a historic overview of grammar instruction in the Hispanic area, where it stands as an unresolved issue. In the case of Spain, while support for communicative approaches has resulted in marginalizing grammar instruction, research on metalinguistic activity suggests that linguistic reflection underpinning language use and the grammar system might well be the backbone of language education.

**Rodríguez-Gonzalo, C. (2015). A classroom intervention on Spanish grammar and writing: The use of the past tense with secondary school students. *Culture and Education* 27(4), 879–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11356405.2015.1089388>**

This article presents an innovative experience that links grammar teaching with writing, following the premises of the Grammar Instructional Sequences (GIS) as described in Ribas et al. (2014; see above), with one basic objective: to create a situation in which students learn to reflect on the language they use and are able to use these reflections to improve their writing. The GIS, focused on the use of past tense verb forms, was carried out with fourth-year secondary school students in Spain (aged 15–16 years). The study highlights the difficulties experienced by students when they use grammatical concepts as elements to control usage and the importance of revising texts in order to create metalinguistic awareness in a recursive pedagogic process: from grammar to writing, from writing to grammatical revision, and a final version of the text.

**Milian, M. (2005). Reformulation: A means of constructing knowledge in shared writing. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 5(3), 335–51. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10674-005-8560-9>**

This paper explores the process of collaborative writing of a group of 11-year-old pupils in Spain, focusing on the phenomenon of reformulation. The author considers that writers benefit from speaking about their writing while engaging in collaborative writing processes, organizing the task, planning the content, and articulating their views about the audience, purpose, and form of their text. Reformulation is described as empirical evidence of how metalinguistic awareness (implicit in what is being said, assumed, and declared) might be achieved through conversation while participating in a shared writing task. Reformulation opens up the possibility of identifying potential obstacles for students' effective metalinguistic activity.

**Taylor, T.J. (2000). Language constructing language: The implications of reflexivity for linguistic theory. *Language Sciences* 22(4), 483–99. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001\(00\)00016-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001(00)00016-4)**

In this paper, Taylor explores the inherently reflexive character of language. Language may be used—and pervasively is used—to talk about language: its entities, properties, powers, norms, effects, and uses. Such metalinguistic discourse is not merely a contingent or peripheral linguistic feature but is a fundamental and defining feature of language and language use. Adopting a cultural perspective on language studies, Taylor argues that first-order linguistic activities—such

as writing, translating, pragmatics, semantics, and language acquisition and evolution—could not exist without language's second-order reflexive properties. Taylor's work on metalanguage and linguistic reflexivity can also be found in his *Theorizing Language: Analysis, Normativity, Rhetoric, History* (Pergamon Press, 1997) and in several subsequent articles, including “Where Does Language Come From? The Role of Reflexive Enculturation in Language Development” (*Language Sciences* 32.1, 14–27, 2010), “Understanding Others and Understanding Language: How Do Children Do It?” (*Language Sciences* 34.1, 1–12, 2012), and “Folk-linguistic Fictions and the Explananda of the Language Sciences” (*New Ideas in Psychology* 42, 7–13, 2016).

**Myhill, D.A., Jones, S.M., Lines, H., and Watson, A.M. (2012). Re-thinking grammar: The impact of embedded grammar teaching on students' writing and students' metalinguistic understanding. *Research Papers in Education* 27(2), 139–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.637640>**

The authors report on a national study that set out to investigate whether contextualized teaching of grammar, linked to the teaching of writing, would improve student outcomes in writing and in metalinguistic understanding. The study involved 744 students in 31 schools in the south-west and the midlands of England, and statistical data were complemented by interviews and lesson observations. In addition, the final pieces of writing produced for each scheme of work were collected. The statistical results not only indicate a significant positive effect for the intervention but also indicate that this benefit was experienced more strongly by the more able writers in the sample. The analysis also indicates that teacher subject knowledge was a significant mediating factor in the success of the intervention. The qualitative data reveal that teachers found explicitness, use of discussion, and emphasis on playful experimentation to be the most salient features of the intervention. See also Myhill (and colleagues) *Essential Primary Grammar* (Open University Press, 2016) *Writing Conversations: Fostering Metalinguistic Discussion about Writing*” (*Research Papers in Education* 31.1, 23–44, 2016), and “Grammar for Writing? An Investigation into the Effect of Contextualised Grammar Teaching on Student Writing” (*Reading and Writing* 26.8, 1241–63, 2013). See also Myhill and Jones, “Conceptualising Metalinguistic Understanding in Writing” (*Culture and Education* 27.4, 839–67, 2015).

**Locke, T. (ed) (2010). Beyond the grammar wars: A resource for teachers and students on developing language knowledge in the English/literacy classroom. London: Routledge.**

A must-read in the field that gathers together works by top specialists concerning various issues on grammar instruction. The introductory chapter sets out what the editor describes as “the over-riding question driving this book”: what explicit/implicit knowledge about language in teachers and/or students appears to enhance literacy development in some way? A first part explores grammar approaches in different educational jurisdictions in the Anglophone area, and on a second part, the effectiveness of grammar teaching according to empirical research is presented. Part three presents some insights into grammar and critical language awareness, the role metalanguage plays, the need to scaffold grammar in the context of writing, and the possibilities of a functional approach to grammar at primary school. A final part explores new territories to further develop the debate into grammar instruction and multi modal texts. Two more volumes of similar characteristics are *Linguistics at School: Language Awareness in Primary and Secondary Education* (Denham & Lobeck eds, Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *Knowing about Language: Linguistics and the Secondary English Classroom* (Giovannelli & Clayton eds,

Routledge-NATE, 2016). See also Locke, *Developing Writing Teachers: Practical Ways for Teacher-Writers to Transform their Classroom Practice* (Routledge, 2015) and Kolln and Gray, *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* (Pearson, 2016).

**Dolz, J. and Simard, C. (eds) (2009). *Pratiques d'enseignement grammatical: Points de vue de l'enseignant et de l'élève* [Practices of grammar instruction: Teacher and student perspectives]. Québec: PUL.**

This volume presents 11 chapters by top researchers in the Francophone area. An introductory chapter by the editors summarizes a recent history of L1 French grammar instruction, which according to the authors shows the extent to which the study of teaching procedures and learning processes has been underexplored. They maintain that further investigation of these two interrelated issues should bring new insights into the processes of transposition of grammar content. In this respect, the issues on which the various chapters focus move around the three areas of the pedagogic system (teaching, learning, and content), drawing on issues such as the need to conceptualize what “grammar practices” are, how grammar reflection can apply both to written and oral discourse, the fragility of teachers' grammar knowledge, and so forth. See also the volume *Le Verbe en Toute Complexité: Acquisition, Transversalité et Apprentissage* [The verb in all its complexity: Acquisition, transversality, and learning] (Gomila & Ulma eds, L'Harmattan, 2014). A parallel to the latter in Spanish is *El Verbo y su Enseñanza: Hacia un Modelo de Enseñanza de la Gramática Basado en la Actividad Reflexiva* [The Verb and Its Teaching: Towards a Model of Grammar Instruction Based on Reflexive Activity] (Camps & Ribas eds, Octaedro, 2017).

**Hudson, R. (2016). Grammar instruction. In C. MacArthur, S. Graham, and J. Fitzgerald (eds), *Handbook of writing research* (2nd edition) (pp. 288-300). London: Guilford.**

Beginning with an introduction of Cartesian clarity that gives a brief history of grammar teaching in different regions (under the premise that “Grammar instruction is an extremely ancient art, and almost certainly one of the oldest branches of formal education in literate societies”, p. 288), Hudson then articulates a 5-WH route to support a rationale for grammar instruction: Why, when, and how should grammar be taught? What grammar should be taught? And who should teach grammar? Theoretical models are discussed in order to complexify the often simplistic approach to grammar teaching and writing, polarized around two views: Grammar teaching does/does not improve writing. The author draws on some of the questions on which research in the area has focused (e.g., what is the target of grammar teaching? and how is it different from the children's existing knowledge of grammar?) and suggests some paths for further research. He closes his text by maintaining that the transfer of grammar knowledge into improving writing will only happen if children have a deep understanding of grammar that can only come from systematic teaching. See also by the same author, “Linguistic Theory” (in *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, pp. 53–65, Spolsky and Hulst eds, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

**Fontich, X. and Camps, A. (2014). Towards a rationale for research into grammar teaching in schools. *Research Papers in Education* 29(5), 598–625. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.813579>**

This article raises the question of the need to look more closely at the so-called “pedagogic system” that results from the links between teaching procedures, the learning process, and content.

The authors maintain that the pedagogical system should be the focus of research on grammar teaching if we want to build a sound knowledge of a complex object (as is the case of grammar teaching and learning related to language use, especially writing). The text builds on the following three questions: (a) What is the aim of grammar teaching?; (b) How capable are students of conceptualizing about language and how is their metalinguistic activity shown in their language use?; and finally, (c) Which approach is more suitable for enabling students to develop their own knowledge, with emphasis on the role of interaction in the classroom? The article concludes with 10 key points; these provide a basic outline for progressing in grammar teaching research. Also by Fontich, “La Gramática de la Primera Lengua en la Escuela: Reflexiones Sobre su Enseñanza-aprendizaje y Sobre el Contenido Gramatical Escolar” [L1 Grammar at School: Reflections on its Teaching and Learning and on School Grammar Content], *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature* 6.3, 1–19, 2013). See also the volume *Metalinguistic activity straddling grammar and writing* (Camps & Fontich comps, in preparation).

### 3 | ONLINE MATERIALS

1. <http://teach-grammar.com/research>

This relatively recent webpage is maintained by Geoff Dean (a former primary and secondary teacher and currently a consultant in language education) and Dick Hudson (Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at UCL-University College London and Fellow of the British Academy). It is devoted to exploring the teaching of grammar in Language Arts, mainly in the UK but also in other countries. Its aim is to gather papers, projects, books, and collective volumes concerning a number of issues, such as why grammar is worth teaching in UK schools (both in English lessons and in foreign language lessons); what grammar can and should be taught; how it can be taught successfully; how and why it is taught in other countries and has been taught at other times in the UK; and how to boost one’s own knowledge of grammatical ideas and terminology. The webpage also includes tabs for “Self-help” on how to improve one’s own grammatical knowledge and a listing of “Events” such as conferences or lectures about grammar teaching, both UK-based and internationally. It also invites anyone interested in the field to register on an email list (which has grown impressively in the fairly brief life of this useful initiative).

2. <http://www.fzayas.com/darlealalengua/>

This is a highly regarded blog in Spanish, edited by Felipe Zayas, a former teacher at a secondary school in Valencia (Spain). As a figure of speech, the title “Darle a la lengua” means “to chatter,” which falls satisfactorily into the conversational spirit of the posts. However, it can also refer to the idea of thinking a matter over—in this case, language and how to teach its different aspects. Indeed, the author succeeds in maintaining a balance between a casually humorous style and thoroughly articulated content. Controversial issues with suggestions for intervention are presented. See, for instance, *Conocimiento de la gramática y uso de la Lengua* [Grammar knowledge and the use of language 10.3.2006]; *A vueltas con la gramática* [Thinking over and over about grammar 3.12.2006]; *¿Qué gramática enseñar y para qué?* [What grammar to teach and what for? 13.9.2008]; *El giro copernicano en la enseñanza de la Lengua* [The Copernican Turn in teaching language 17.3.2011]; *Acerca de la actualización de los contenidos de Lengua* [On updating grammar contents 17.11.2011]; *Más sobre contenidos fosilizados en la enseñanza de la Lengua*



[More about fossilized content in grammar instruction 18.8.2012]; *Lingüística cognitiva y enseñanza de la Lengua* [Cognitive linguistics and language teaching 4.2.2016]; *El objetivo de la enseñanza de la gramática* [The objective of grammar instruction 7.2.2017]; and *Por qué enseñar a reconocer las clases de palabras* [Why teaching to recognize Word class 1.10.2017]. Also by the same author, “La composición de noticias” [The composition of news] (in *Secuencias didácticas para aprender a escribir* [Instructional sequences for learning to write], pp. 135–51, Camps comp, Graó, 2003, <http://www.fzayas.com/portfolio/la-composicion-de-noticias/>).

3. <https://scolagram.u-cergy.fr/index.php>

This is the site of a newly created and promising online journal in French, *Scolagram*, devoted to research on grammar instruction and maintained by the research group Episteverb (Jean-Pierre Sautot, Claudie Péret, Solveig Lepoire, Patrice Gourdet, Dominique Ulma, and Marie-Laure Elalouf) under the auspices of AIRDF (Association Internationale pour la Recherche en Didactique du Français). Its scientific committee includes outstanding researchers from 13 institutions in the Francophone area (e.g., Bernard Combettes, J.-F. de Pietro, Carole Fisher, Dan Van Raemdonck, Marie-Noëlle Roubaud, Caroline Masseron, and so forth). The journal aims at integrating research and the transfer of research outcomes into classroom materials and guidelines on the premise that grammar learning is not about mechanical learning of analytic terms but about learning how to “use them in situations of manipulation where they are necessary” (from the Introduction “Quelle grammaire?” [What grammar?]).

## 4 | SAMPLE UNIT

The following portion of a syllabus reflects the thematic format of the article it is linked to, which approaches grammar instruction from a threefold perspective: conceptual reflections on what grammar stands for and the role of reflexivity within it; grammar as a system; and the interplay between grammar and writing. The goal of the syllabus is to show how these three approaches can be integrated in classroom tasks and to encourage practitioners and pre-service student teachers to explore how metalinguistic activity can be promoted as a source of grammar learning. It is designed for advanced undergraduate and graduate students and current teachers in Language Arts interested in re-thinking how to deal with grammar teaching. The syllabus assumes that the best way to understand how to implement a new perspective in the classroom is by getting oneself involved in the tasks.

### **Week 1: Towards conceptual clarity in grammar teaching and learning**

This is a general introduction to the role that reflexivity plays in natural languages. Assuming that explicit language reflection (i.e., using language to reflect upon language) is at the core of the process of teaching and learning language, it reflects on which linguistic research trends consider reflexivity as theoretically prominent. It maintains that such research trends, which are of a sociocultural orientation, believe that reflexivity fuels language learning and development. According to this perspective, the goal of grammar instruction ought to be less of an articulation of a syllabus of grammar contents and procedures (the *what* and the *how*) but more of a prompting of metalinguistic activity in the classroom (in the form of social interaction), as a source of learning a plethora of concepts that allow reflecting on both the grammar system

and language use (the *what for*). It also locates metalinguistic activity within the pedagogic system, i.e., the interplay among content, teaching, and learning.

## Suggested Readings

Fontich, X. (2016). L1 Grammar instruction and writing: Metalinguistic activity as a teaching and research focus. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 10(5), 238–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12184>

Taylor, T.J. (2000). Language constructing language: The implications of reflexivity for linguistic theory. *Language Sciences* 22(4), 483–99. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001\(00\)00016-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001(00)00016-4)

Hudson, R. (2016). Grammar instruction. In C. MacArthur, S. Graham, and J. Fitzgerald (eds), *Handbook of writing research* (2nd edition) (pp. 288–300). London: Guilford.

Fontich, X. and Camps, A. (2014). Towards a rationale for research into grammar teaching in schools. *Research Papers in Education* 29(5), 598–625. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.813579>

Locke, T. (ed) (2010). *Beyond the grammar wars: A resource for teachers and students on developing language knowledge in the English/literacy classroom*. London: Routledge.

## Suggested Learning Exercise

Learning exercise #1 (see below for details).

## Week 2: Approaching grammar as a system

Some scholars have dismissed grammar as a system and as something well worth exploring and considered that grammar leads to a sort of reified knowledge independent from language use. Some maintain that it is especially so when operating on a sentence level and advocate for text-based grammar instruction. However, other studies suggest the pedagogic benefits of operating on both levels, assuming that in fact both sentence- and text-levels result from an organic interplay of pragmatic, semantic, and morphosyntactic elements. It is also felt that, while text-level is closer to language in use, we may need to approach grammar phenomena as temporarily detached from this use, concentrating on well-controlled sentences in order to focus on the phenomenon at stake. This would give us a more informed stance when approaching the phenomenon within the communicative flow. This means that the debate ceases to be around the benefits/lack of benefits of text-level activities with regard to sentence-level activities and focuses instead (a) on how to deliver adequate tools that help students overcome obstacles located on both levels (e.g., subject-verb agreement, thematic progression, and so forth) and (b) on how classroom interaction can fuel the learning process.

## Suggested Readings

Dolz, J. and Simard, C. (eds) (2009). *Pratiques d'enseignement grammatical: Points de vue de l'enseignant et de l'élève* [Practices of grammar instruction: Teacher and student perspectives]. Québec: PUL.

Ribas, T., Fontich, X., and Guasch, O. (eds) (2014). *Grammar at school: Metalinguistic activity in language education*. Brussels: Peter Lang.



Fontich, X. and García-Folgado, M.J. (2018). Grammar instruction in the Hispanic area: The case of Spain with attention to empirical studies on metalinguistic activity. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 18, 1–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2018.18.04.02>

## Suggested Learning Exercise

Learning exercise #2 (see below for details).

## Week 3: Metalinguistic activity straddling grammar and writing

This is the week when students learn about the intersection between grammar reflection and writing. This space is intended to prevent grammar and language use from operating as independent realms by drawing on metalinguistic activity as source of knowledge when adequately scaffolded by the teacher. All assigned readings embrace such an approach, and the suggested exercises will present specific tasks in some detail so that a clear-cut idea can be made as to how to implement it in the classroom.

## Suggested Readings

Myhill, D.A., Jones, S.M., Lines, H., and Watson, A.M. (2012). Re-thinking grammar: The impact of embedded grammar teaching on students' writing and students' metalinguistic understanding. *Research Papers in Education* 27(2), 139–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.637640>

Camps, A. and Milian, M. (eds) (2000). *Metalinguistic activity in learning to write*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Rodríguez-Gonzalo, C. (2015). A classroom intervention on Spanish grammar and writing: The use of the past tense with secondary school students. *Culture and Education* 27(4), 879–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11356405.2015.1089388>.

Milian, M. (2005). Reformulation: A means of constructing knowledge in shared writing. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 5(3), 335–51. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10674-005-8560-9>

Zayas, F. (2003). La composición de noticias [The composition of news]. In A. Camps (comp), *Secuencias didácticas para aprender a escribir [Instructional sequences for learning to write]* (pp. 135–51). Barcelona: Graó. <http://www.fzayas.com/portfolio/la-composicion-de-noticias/> [retrieved in 13.1.2018].

## Suggested Learning Exercises

Learning exercises #3 and #4 (see below for details).

## 5 | FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What is our own experience of learning grammar at school? Embedded in writing and as such implicit? Detached from language use? Embedded to some extent in language use (e.g., in writing, in reading, and so forth) with punctual grammatical reflections?

2. In what ways can the same grammar concept (e.g., adjective, relative clause, present tense, and so forth) be approached from either formal or communicative viewpoints? To what extent can such viewpoints be complementary?
3. To what extent is discussion on grammar issues possible? Can you think of what conditions a task should fulfill in order to make classroom interaction turn into a meaningful procedure in learning grammar? Could metalinguistic writing also reach the status of a useful tool?
4. Can you think of grammar content that would be better approached when embedded in writing tasks, with regard to other content that, detached from language use, should first be approached on its own?
5. Can you think of interconnections between writing, grammar, and text revision?
6. Can you think of ways to expand traditional grammar teaching sessions (e.g., rote learning of definitions) by including them in projects supported by classroom interaction, manipulation of linguistic data, reading/writing of metalinguistic texts, oral presentations, and writing?

### **5.1 | Learning exercise #1: Exploring what grammar stands for and what the role of reflexivity can be in the classroom**

This exercise aims at familiarizing students with two ideas. First, reflection is at the core of teaching and learning processes. And second, while all theoretical approaches to the study of languages deserve equal respect, not all of them endorse reflexivity as theoretically relevant. This activity aims at increasing awareness of the incidence this may have in classroom practice. For example, when drawing on grammar content elaborated within what we could call “nativist approaches,” we should be aware that such approaches do not consider interaction as representative of what we trust a language to be. The effect this may have on classroom pedagogy is that interaction may be seen as an important technique for classroom management but not as the crux of the matter for language development. Contrariwise, if we take an outside-in perspective on languages (i.e., languages are culturally created), interaction becomes the backbone for internalizing what is first in the social arena. In other words, whereas languages allow for linguistic communication from the former perspective, for the latter, it is communication that triggers languages, resulting from an emerging process that leads towards a perceived and stable set of rules. This perspective maintains that while rules may explain how a language works, rules are not seen to trigger the process of linguistic formation.

A survey can be prepared to explore the position of a number of linguists, educational researchers, practitioners, undergraduate students, and primary and secondary pupils. A brief questionnaire can draw on the four themes at stake (i.e., grammar knowledge, reflexivity, writing, and grammar system) with basic questions such as “What does grammar signify for you?”; “How do you think it should be taught?”; “Can you describe a good experience in learning language at school?”; “Why do you consider this was a good experience?”; and “Why should grammar be taught at all?” This survey can include informers from different regions, countries, and educational jurisdictions, thereby opening up invaluable possibilities for contrast. The answers can be interpreted through the lenses of the two approaches mentioned (i.e., an inside-out perspective that sees languages as innate sets of rules vs. an outside-in perspective that sees languages as cultural outcomes) and the role given to reflexivity. This can be extended by analyzing classroom activities (e.g., from current textbooks, from one's experience, from interviewees' answers, and so forth) and exploring the nature of their conceptual roots. For instance, some tasks may target implicit learning, assuming that our linguistic competence develops without

the need for explicit reflection, while others may propel students to reflect upon what they are doing, discuss in groups what linguistic possibilities are more adequate, and come up with a decision on how to use them (i.e., assuming that concepts are only available when they are part of an explicitly built system). Even so, some others might somehow be in the middle, e.g., tasks that entail defining grammar elements and practicing them in controlled contexts, expecting the learners to use them in their pieces of writing.

## 5.2 | Learning exercise #2: Talking and writing to learn grammar

The purpose of this exercise is to draw on a concept of grammar as supported by the integration of formal, semantic, and pragmatic elements. As a general approach, a number of sentences, either invented or adapted from journalistic texts, can be put under scrutiny in order to identify hidden information, intentions, ideology, and the like. The ultimate goal is to see that we intend to communicate through what we say, through what we do not say, and through how we say/do not say it. A sentence (perfectly acceptable in Spanish) such as “During the last minutes of the match many objects were raining over the referee” can be analyzed by exploring the close interplay between intentions (e.g., why choosing “rain” instead of the more literal “throw”?), meanings (e.g., “rain” ceases to refer to the phenomenon from the atmosphere), and form (e.g., the plural subject for “rain,” itself a verb defective of plural). Other similar sentences, also with a subtle concealing of the agent, can be found and discussed (e.g., the current president of Spain trying to exonerate his own party mates from corruption scandals by maintaining that “Corruption has arisen”). On a more focused level, the threefold link between the verb and its arguments can be explored (i.e., a verb can admit, require, or refuse certain arguments and not others), proving the two-way connection between transitivity and intransitivity, depending on our communicative intentions. We can explore sentences with metaphorical uses of the verb (“When the Titanic sank, we can say that the Ocean devoured a dream”), absolute uses (“Peter does not drink anymore” meaning that he is no longer an alcoholic), and so forth. Communicative intentions can create a mismatch between what we say and what we are referring to, e.g., by using a verb in the present tense to refer to something in the past (i.e., historical present) such as in “In 1969 Humankind lands on the Moon.” This can lead us to language uses when formal aspects do not operate at the forefront, such as in indirect speech acts (e.g., “Gosh! It is so cold in here!” meaning “Could you please close the window”). Also, the use of adjectives, relative clauses, hypernyms, synonyms, and the like can contribute decisively to transforming a rather neutral review (of a book, a film, etc.) into a really poignant text that indirectly expresses the author’s position (e.g., “A deadly tedious/boring/not fully achieved/spot on/etc. film of pretentious/bad/rigorous/etc. historic reconstruction with a stinking/unfortunate/chauvinist/hilarious/unexpected/etc. sense of humour”). During the tasks, each student writes short notes in their student diary, which can serve for discussing what everyone else thought that they had to learn about grammar and what difficulties were encountered. An exercise such as dictation can be a very rigid task with a convergent solution (i.e., with only one possible solution) supported by a formal and normative vision of what errors are (focusing on “what” is correct or incorrect rather than on “why” it appears to be so), resulting also in a very strict distribution of work: Those who dictate hold the answer, and those who write may not necessarily hold it. However important this approach may be, dictations also have the potential to promote a deeper metalinguistic activity by setting up students in pairs or small group to discuss and explore issues such as adequacy, ambiguity, writers’ intentions, and the like, in both convergent and non-convergent tasks.

### 5.3 | Learning exercise #3: From tales to headlines

In this exercise, the potential of journalistic texts is explored. While texts have sometimes been merely an excuse for the teaching of grammar content, this exercise seeks to integrate reflection on grammar notions of the three kinds mentioned earlier (i.e., pragmatic, semantic, and formal) in order to write a proper text and resonates with the operation of “sentence-combining.” The actual task consists of transforming a genre of one kind into another kind, namely, a tale into a piece of news. Content will have to be reorganized according to the communicative function of the new text and its conventional structure. While the organizing categories of a tale are *initial situation*, *conflict*, *development of action*, *plot ending*, and *final situation*, now the structure pivots around *headline*, *lead*, *episodes* (events and consequences), and *comments*. Some of the learning objectives are to observe that the organizing principles of the texts (e.g., of hierarchy, selection, and the like) respond to pragmatic factors; reflect on what the most specific syntactical patterns are for specific intentions; connect the thematic cohesion with adequate lexical choices, and so on. Zayas (2003) suggests using the short tale by L. Tolstoy “The force caused by speed.”\*

Once a train was travelling very fast towards a level crossing where a horse pulling a very heavy cart had got stuck in the way of the train. The peasant was trying to get the horse off the crossing, but it couldn't pull the cart because one of the rear wheels had fallen off. The conductor shouted to the train-driver: ‘Stop the train!’, but the driver didn't. He realized that the peasant wouldn't be able to get the horse to move forward with the cart, or to move it backwards out of the way. He also realized that it would be impossible to bring the engine to a dead halt. So he didn't stop; instead, he accelerated and ran into the cart at full speed. The peasant managed to get away from the cart, the train tossed the horse and cart out of its way as if they were feathers, and it carried on without even rocking. Then the train-driver said to the conductor: ‘Now we've killed a horse and smashed the cart, and that's all. But if I had listened to you, we would've killed ourselves and all the passengers. As we were moving at high speed, we tossed the cart out of the way and didn't even feel the impact, but if we'd been moving at low speed, the train would have come off the rails’. [\*Tolstoy, L.N. 1982. *Ot skorosti sila* (The force caused by speed, trad. from Russian by L. Navtanovich). In *Sobranie sochinenii v 22 tomakh* (The collection of works in 22 volumes) (vol. 10, p. 17). Moscow: Khudozhestvennaja literatura].

A first exercise can be that of writing headlines, whose syntactic organization can follow different semantic patterns according to the thematic focus: (a) *somebody does something* (The driver avoids a serious accident); (b) *somebody experiences something* (Driver honored for avoiding train derailment); (c) *something does something* (A train runs over a cart); (d) *something triggers something* (High speed prevents train derailment), and so forth. According to our choices and focus of interest when organizing the headline, the agent and the subject may/may not overlap, as in (a) and (b), or the subject may/may not be animate as in (c) and (d). This operation can be replicated in transforming all sort of short tales and folk stories. As regard to the lead, it can be worked upon as a first general sentence used as a skeleton (e.g., *The cart had stopped in the middle of the railway*), further expanded with references to (invented) 5-WH details (e.g., *It happened yesterday*; *It happened near Barcelona-Sants Station*; *The train was an Intercity*; *The line was Barcelona-Madrid*), resulting in a cohesive sentence with noun complements (adjectives,

relative clauses, and non-finite clauses) and verb complements (referring to time, location, and the like): “A cart stopped in the middle of the railway was run over yesterday afternoon near Barcelona-Sants station by an Intercity train on the Barcelona-Madrid line.” Cohesion all along the paragraphs can be worked upon by raising awareness of the chain formed by nouns, synonyms, hypernyms, pronouns, and periphrases, as well as through lexical choice, related partly to the vocabulary already introduced in the headline and the lead, such as *cart*, *train driver*, *peasant*, *train*, *driver decision*, *accident*, *speed*, and so forth.

#### 5.4 | Learning exercise #4: Writing with grammar choices in mind

First, the objective of this exercise is to raise awareness of the grammatical repertoire in oral and written modes, assuming that there is no clear-cut gap between the two but rather a gradation (e.g., oralized written texts as if they were spoken in a theater, written texts meant to be read aloud as in key-note conferences, and so forth). An autobiographical text may allow a focus on personal (not private) information, thus enhancing the learners' engagement with the task. However, as a narrative text, while the combination of verb tenses appears to be of great importance, some studies show the students' tendency to transfer their reduced oral repertoire of informal uses (e.g., with low or no use of past perfect) into the written mode (which reproduces a more complex micro-system). A number of tasks can be set up to explore issues such as the future in the past, the past in the past, past that is closer to the present, present that means past, present that means future, and so forth. This can be done through comparing texts with only one tense. Also, linguistic texts on verb values can be explored to elaborate on pedagogic material (e.g., definitions, tasks, examples, and so forth), as well as posters for oral presentation. Furthermore, a grammatical repertoire can be explored through the notion of adequacy, where the addressee plays a major role in organizing the text content and in conveying this content through the most adequate linguistic choices (i.e., what information should I include and how?). In a potential writing task for secondary students with primary pupils in mind, students can be asked to work out possible tasks devoted to broadening their knowledge of the addressees, such as what their previous ideas might have been, what their intentions in reading the text might be, how texts already written for this age group can be analyzed, and what kind of tasks can be suggested for practicing lexical choice or paraphrasing, and so forth.

**How to cite this article:** Fontich X. Teaching & learning guide for: “L1 Grammar instruction and writing: Metalinguistic activity as a teaching and research focus”. *Lang Linguist Compass*. 2018;e12273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12273>