

# **The notion of verb mood in students in compulsory secondary education**

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## **Starting point**

In this chapter we present the partial results of a study whose purpose is to observe the role of metalinguistic reflection in students' learning of grammar concepts (Durán, 2013), and more specifically to inquire into the notion of verb mood as constructed by students in compulsory secondary education in Spain (aged 12-16) throughout their education. We have started with the conviction that knowing how a linguistic system works enables us to better understand what other people are saying, to capture nuances better and, in short, to communicate more effectively. That is, we believe that speakers need explicit grammar knowledge in order to improve their oral and written language use – especially in the formal registers – and that this knowledge, which is part of the information that schools should provide (Camps, 1986), is also interesting in itself. This is an approach that focuses on both meaning and form and stresses the importance of grammatical knowledge linked to both use and reflection on use (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Bialystok, 1991; Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1996; Ellis, 1990).

However, research has revealed the difficulties schoolchildren show when building grammatical notions that they can use to explain how the language system works (Chartrand, 1996; Camps *et al.*, 2001; Fisher, 2004; Myhill, 2011) and when achieving sound metalinguistic competence, the latter meaning conscious, explicit knowledge of the language based on observation, description and ultimately reflection on how it is used. The intrinsic epistemological complexity of the subject of this study is compounded first by students' difficulty seeing language as an object that can be observed and analysed, and secondly by the somewhat entrenched teaching methodologies used when teaching grammar (Camps, 2009), a subject that has often been approached as studying closed, immobile grammar contents to which students have nothing to contribute.

This is the avenue of research of the Grup de Recerca sobre Ensenyament i Aprenentatge de Llengües (Research Group in Language Teaching and Learning, GREAL) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), within which this study was conducted. The group's studies on teaching writing (Camps and Milian, 2000; Camps *et al.*, 2000) first reveal that when students write with their peers, they experience intense metalinguistic activity which enables them to observe how the language works from different levels of abstraction. Likewise, the studies on students' grammatical knowledge enable us to understand the characteristics of this knowledge and the difficulties that learners encounter (Camps *et al.*, 2001; Notario, 2001; Durán, 2009a and 2010; Casas, 2012; Torralba, 2012), while they also enable us to observe the complex relationships between conceptualisation and use (Rodríguez Gonzalo, 2011).

Some of these studies have focused on the knowledge students have constructed around the category of *verb* at different educational levels. In primary education, Torralba (2012) explores students' comprehension of the concept of tense, while Casas (2012) examines their concept of the present. In secondary education, Durán (2009a) analyses students' representations of the verb category, Fontich (2010 and forthcoming) focuses on verb complementation and Rodríguez Gonzalo (2011) examines past tenses. The sum of these studies provides an invaluable glimpse into how students construct knowledge about a category that affects all levels of language organisation: morphological, semantic, syntactic, textual and discursive-declarative. These studies allow us to work towards developing a pedagogical grammar proposal that articulates knowledge about language with the competences of comprehension and production, starting from the students' prior knowledge and the epistemological and cognitive difficulties that emerge from this (Fisher, 1996 and 2004; Camps *et al.*, 2001; Camps, 2000 and 2009).

Within this context of research on grammatical concepts and on students' metalinguistic activity, we shall centre our study on a notion that has barely been studied within the context of teaching Spanish as a native language: the notion of verb mood, and specifically the conceptualisation of the subjunctive. This grammar content is linked to both sentences and discourse. It is linked to sentences because it appears via the verb, and it is linked to discourse as an element of mood (Bybee and Fleischman, 1995; Cuenca 2008; Bosque and Gutiérrez-Rexach, 2009). This makes mood the ideal concept from which to observe the relationships that students forge between system and usage.

Our work is based on a series of hypotheses: the first is that studying verb mood is extraordinarily complex from the standpoint of both descriptive grammar and language learning and teaching, while it is also

a notion that goes largely unnoticed in secondary school classrooms. The second is that just like any competent speakers, secondary school students – boys and girls aged 12 to 16 – are capable of using mood correctly and of identifying a wide range of expressive effects through mood alternation (Ahern, 2004), but that favourable conditions must be created for these students to make this implicit knowledge about the language explicit. The third hypothesis is that some instructional interventions encourage reflection on language more than others.

The ultimate goal of this study is to explore, observe and understand how secondary school students conceptualise the subjunctive through a mood contrast activity that triggers metalinguistic reflection. This end goal takes shape in three research questions:<sup>1</sup>

1. What knowledge have secondary school students constructed regarding the concept of verb mood, and more specifically regarding the subjunctive?
2. What is the influence of the instructional intervention on the emergence of students' metalinguistic activity?
3. What metalanguage do students use to justify the indicative-subjunctive contrast?

In the following sections we shall address some of the key aspects of the theoretical framework of this study; we shall explain the design of the instructional intervention and the methodology used to answer the questions above; and we shall highlight some of the results. Due to space limitations, we shall focus on the results of the analysis of the texts written by the students. We shall close the chapter with some final reflections as our conclusion.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Metalinguistic activity and teaching grammar***

Speakers' metalinguistic activity – in which the focus of attention is the language itself – is an inherent human activity that cannot be disassociated with linguistic activity, yet it does not always appear consciously (Culioli, 1990; Karmiloff-Smith, 1992; Gombert, 1990; Camps, 2000; Camps and Milian, 2000). This activity can be either implicit or explicit, and it can be expressed in either everyday or specific language (Weinrich, 1976; Rey-Debove, 1978; Camps, 2000). It is also possible for there to “coexist

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<sup>1</sup> In a more global study, we posed a fourth research question on the relationships between the characteristics of the knowledge shown by the students and knowledge of verb mood that can be gleaned from the textbooks used by these same students. The results of this question are outlined in Durán (2012).

[diverse] manifestations of this activity within the same individual and almost at the same time depending on the actions being performed” (Milian, 2005, p. 16).

The use of specific terminology has been shown to be a useful tool for reflecting on language, as long as it is accompanied by an understanding of the notions behind the terms (Myhill, 2011; Torralba, 2012; Casas, 2012; Durán, 2009a; Durán, 2009b) and is linked to users’ prior knowledge of how the language system works (Myhill *et al.*, 2011; Rodríguez Gonzalo, 2011). In contrast, an imprecise use of metalanguage is related to students’ conceptualisation difficulties, as at times they construct a given notion in an incomplete or even erroneous fashion. Grammar categories are notions with a high level of cognitive difficulty that require a long and laborious process of construction, as well as mediation by educators who help students to learn abstract concepts (Barth, 2001; van Hiele, 1986). Likewise, according to cognitive linguistics (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987), grammar categories have diffuse, permeable boundaries that hinder students from categorising them.

Within this framework, reflection on language is viewed as a key factor in students’ language training, which contributes to its systematisation and serves as the necessary bridge between language knowledge and use (Camps *et al.*, 2005; Guasch *et al.*, 2008). Metalinguistic reasoning has been shown to be the bridge needed between declarative language knowledge and a conscious use of language resources to achieve more effective communication (Milian, 2005), as well as the link between knowledge established by the different language schools (scientific knowledge, outside of the individual) and knowledge under construction (internal and constantly evolving).

Metalinguistic reflection often emerges from verbal activity itself, when communication requirements make it necessary to make the language the topic of consideration, yet it achieves a high degree of consciousness when an instructional intervention guides this process. That is, it requires a school intervention that makes language *opaque* or brings it into focus as an observable object and accompanies students in the complex process of abstraction and generalisation needed for this conceptualisation. Studies show that the shift from knowledge from use to systematic knowledge does not happen spontaneously, nor can it be directly gleaned from the metalinguistic activity that is prompted in processes of verb use; instead, it requires instructional intervention. Abstract knowledge of language does not emanate from use (DeKeyser, 2008; Milian and Camps, 2006; Camps, 2010); rather it is a theoretical construct that must be addressed at school with the goal of developing children’s capacity to observe and reflect on language starting at a very young age (Camps, 1986).

In short, reflection on language is regarded as the pathway that individuals must take to reach an understanding of how the language system works and its relationship with use. School instruction should provide students with activities that give them the chance to observe, manipulate and analyse grammar contents in a process of emerging abstraction (Camps, 2010).

### ***The subjunctive mood: A ball of yarn with many layers wound together***

Verb mood in Romance languages is extremely complex; this is related to a variety of factors and affects both use – in the case of non-native speakers – and the conceptualisation of the notion and awareness of the values it brings. According to Bell (1990, p. 81), “it is like a ball of yarn with many loose strands, each of which seems to lead us to the same tangle”. This complexity can be related to three aspects: the interrelationships between mood and modality, the morphological complexity inherent in verbs and the variety of criteria used to define the notion.

First of all, even though verb mood is limited to the sphere of the sentence and modality pertains to the sphere of discourse, both notions have points of convergence that must be borne in mind in a description of the language system. This is an inclusive relationship: *verb mood* is the morphological frame of the verb which helps us to interpret the modality of the discourse and is therefore more like a manifestation of the speaker’s attitude towards what they are saying (Bybee and Fleischman, 1995; Cuenca, 2008; Bosque and Gutiérrez-Rexach, 2009). *Modality*, however, is a more general notion that involves all the linguistic and extra-linguistic resources within our reach to express the speaker’s attitude, one of which is verb mood. Yet this relationship has traditionally been omitted in both grammar references and teaching materials, which have presented mood as a morphological phenomenon that is strictly associated with sentences. One consequence of this is the separation between grammar and text (Charolles and Combettes, 2001) and the difficulty of working in the classroom on two contents (grammar and discourse) that are actually overlapping and integrated.

Secondly, the complexity of the notion is also related to the very complexity of verbs, one of the categories that poses the most epistemological difficulties. This difficulty comes not only from the large number of different forms involved (a salient feature of Romance languages), but more importantly from the fact that verbs also carry a range of grammatical information that requires a high degree of abstraction. This information includes *tense*, *aspect* and *mood*.

Tense indicates external temporality; that is, it reports on the temporal location of what is being spoken about in relation to the moment of

utterance (*before*, *simultaneous* or *after*). Aspect refers to the internal temporality of the event itself, that is, whether the action is finished or underway. However, mood is not oriented so much towards time distinctions as towards the modal values of subjectivity, possibility, volition and, in general, the sentence's values of non-assertiveness. However, in Romance languages these grammar categories seem to be merged together within a single linguistic framework (Pérez Saldanya, 2002), which makes it more difficult for students to identify the different notions at hand (Durán, 2009a).

Finally, when attempting to define verb mood there is no unanimity regarding the criteria and values of the subjunctive. A survey of the extensive literature on this grammatical concept (cf. Durán, 2013, ch. 2) shows the diverse range of criteria used, both syntactic and semantic-pragmatic and communicative, when defining it and analysing its uses. In an analysis of the subjunctive based on the theory of relevancy (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), Ahern (2004) gives it a procedural meaning (recognition of the speaker's communicative intentions in the interpretation of the utterance) as opposed to a conceptual meaning. The descriptive and methodological propositions stemming from studies on teaching Spanish as a second language are particularly interesting. What stand out are studies that present verb mood from the perspective of cognitive grammar (Ruiz Campillo, 1998; Castañeda, 2004) as a way of integrating the learning of explicit knowledge and attention to the communicative purpose of language.

## **Methodology**

We approached this research as a case study in a natural classroom setting and designed an instructional situation involving explicit grammatical reflection based on mood contrast. Our goal was to observe the students' metalinguistic activity and note how they conceptualise the notion of the subjunctive. The methodology used adopts a qualitative interpretative approach with the exploratory desire to describe a reality as a way of better understanding it (in the sense that understanding human action always entails interpreting), but also with the desire to intervene in order to transform this reality to provide evidence that will enable classroom practices to be improved. The study is also complemented by a quantitative analysis to avoid a contrast between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms (van Lier, 1994; Ricoeur, 1986).

## ***Design and implementation of the study***

The information that we analyse in this study includes a series of texts in which the students try to report in writing on the grammar phenomena

proposed by the researcher. This information-gathering instrument reflects the research goal of getting declarative knowledge of verb mood to emerge and eliciting metalinguistic activity around this grammar content in order to observe how students interpret the difference between the indicative and subjunctive verb forms, what notion of verb mood emerges from their responses and what difficulties they encounter.

The activity has the following features: it is based on students' language use, it activates their previous knowledge (Chartrand, 2003), it poses a language *problem* (Giordan, 1996) based on contrast as an element to spur reflection (Bruner, 1983; Barth, 2001; Nadeau and Fisher, 2006) and it is based on group interaction and writing as the engines for metalinguistic reflection and the re-elaboration of previous knowledge. Within this context, by social interaction we mean a space of reflection and learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

The assignment given to the students in groups was a reflection and writing activity based on a corpus of four sentence pairs where the only difference is their mood (Table 1):

**Table 1. List of sentences and target linguistic aspect**

Sentences	Target linguistic aspect
(1) a. <i>Busco a un alumno que <u>sepa</u> italiano</i> b. <i>Busco a un alumno que <u>sabe</u> italiano</i> (I am looking for a student who knows Italian)	Mood alternation in a defining relative clause. (1a) The speaker is looking for someone who speaks Italian but instead of thinking about a specific person s/he means any person who fits this description. (1b) The speaker is looking for a specific person whom s/he can identify by their knowledge of Italian; however, that does not mean that s/he is seeking this person because of their language ability.
(2) a. <i>Aunque <u>cueste</u> caro me lo voy a comprar</i> b. <i>Aunque <u>cuesta</u> caro me lo voy a comprar</i> (I'm going to buy it even if/ even though it is expensive)	Mood alternation in an adverbial clause of concession. (1a) The speaker does not know the price of what s/he wants to buy or does not consider the price important (even if). (1b) The speaker knows the price, knows that it is expensive yet wants to buy it (even though).
(3) a. <i><u>Quisiera</u> una barra de pan</i> b. <i><u>Quiero</u> una barra de pan</i> (I want/would like a loaf of bread)	Mood alternation in simple sentences. They can both be interpreted in two different ways, depending on the context. (1a) As the verbalisation of a desire that will be difficult to satisfy, or as a specific request made in a courteous way (want). (1b) As the verbalisation of a desire that can easily be satisfied, or as a specific request (would like).

Sentences	Target linguistic aspect
(4) a. <i>Quiero que me lo <u>cuentes</u></i> b. <i>*Quiero que me lo <u>cuentas</u></i> (I want you to tell me)	Mood alternation is impossible in the case of subordinate noun clauses introduced by verbs of volition like <i>querer</i> (to want), which syntactically require the subjunctive mood. Sentence 1b is ungrammatical.

Each sentence pair reflects a different linguistic casuistics with regard to the values of the subjunctive and the syntactic contexts in which they appear, but they are all commonly used in the language. The goal is not to address the range of contexts in which the subjunctive may appear but to observe how students explain the values of the subjunctive in everyday contexts. Only the fourth pair is impossible because sentence *b* is ungrammatical; it was marked with an asterisk, but no further clues were given. Therefore, these sentences test students’ ability to judge the grammatical correctness/incorrectness of sentences and to supply an explanation. The sentences came with questions to guide students’ reflection: “What is the difference between (a) and (b)?”, “Do they mean the same?”, “What word is different?”, “What does this change consist in?”, and “Why do you think we say/write either form?”

The questions focus on both meaning and form. The students have to write their answers on a template (Table 2), which aims to help them in reflecting and writing their answers.

Table 2. Template for written comments on the sentences



The difference between sentences ..... consists in..... ..... ..... ..... ..... The first (a) and the second (b) .....(mean/do not mean) the same thing because..... ..... ..... The word that changes is ..... It changes because/to ..... ..... ..... We say or write the first sentence in this situation ..... and the second in this one.....
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The data were gathered at a secondary school in the province of Barcelona during the academic year 2009-2010 in a regular classroom in a bilingual Spanish-Catalan context. To implement the intervention, we chose one class in the first year of secondary school (aged 12-13), one in the second year (aged 13-14) and one in the fourth year (aged 15-16). Altogether, 17 groups participated in the study with a total of 53 students and 68 texts (four texts per group) (Table 3):

**Table 3. Selection of written texts to be analysed**

Year	Groups	Students	Texts
1 <sup>st</sup>	5	16	20
2 <sup>nd</sup>	6	18	24
4 <sup>th</sup>	6	19	24
Total	17	53	68

### ***Data processing and analysis***

As noted above, this is an interpretative study based on a qualitative approach to students' written metalinguistic discourse. Though guided, the activity requires open-ended responses that enable students to respond more freely using their own language. As we have demonstrated in another paper (Durán, 2009a), this kind of discourse shows muddled knowledge of the language feature being observed which is verbalised using rather imprecise language that mixes different criteria within the same sentence. This signals the need to analyse this discourse – which is very rich yet often fragmentary and imprecise – without losing sight of the overall picture, and to infer what lies behind the students' explanations.

To analyse the students' written texts, we developed systemic webs (Bliss, Monk and Orgbon, 1983), a system used to classify, analyse and represent the qualitative information yielded that encompasses the different ideas expressed by the students. In our study, we codified the items that we believed were important according to the notion to which they are linked and the attributes which the students noticed in order to describe the subjunctive in contrast with the indicative (Table 4).

**Table 4. General table of categories and examples**

General table of categories and examples		
Category	Description	Examples (sentences, group)
Ungrammaticality	The students point out that one of the verb forms violates the grammar rule.	The difference between sentences 4a and 4b consists in <i>that 4b is incorrect [...]</i> (4, Group 1D)

General table of categories and examples		
Category	Description	Examples (sentences, group)
Formal	Phonological/ writing	The students observe a formal change that is limited to how the word that changes is written or sounds. The difference between sentences 1a and 1b consists in <i>that the verb is written differently</i> (1, Group 1C)
	Morphological	The students observe a morphological change and mention it: they refer to the verb category or paradigm. The difference between sentences 1a and 1b consists in <i>the difference in conjugation of the verb “saber”</i> (1, Group 4A)
	Syntactic	The students observe a change that has to do with the syntactic relationships among the words in the sentence. [...] in the sentence the word “cuentas” doesn’t fit with the other words. (4, Group 1D)
SEmAntic	<u>Form</u> + <u>Meaning</u>	The students explain that a change in form leads to a change in meaning. The difference between sentences 1a and 1b consists in <i>that the verb form is different and this affects the meaning.</i> (1, Group 2D)
	Sentence mood	This reflects the speaker’s attitude through specific linguistic structures. We say or write the first one in this situation <i>when it is because you’ve gotten angry, sad, happy</i> and the second one <i>when you’re stating something.</i> (1, Group 1C)
	± Specific	This is related to the individual/class opposition. The indicative chooses the +specific trait while the subjunctive chooses the – specific trait. The difference between sentences 1a and 1b consists in <i>1a, the person doesn’t know whether there is a student who knows Italian, and in 1b the speaker is looking for a specific student.</i> (1, Group 2F)
	± Assertion	This is related to the speaker’s commitment to the information contained in the subordinate clause. The difference between sentences 2a and 2b consists in <i>what it costs; with “cueste” you don’t know whether it’s going to be cheap or expensive, and with “cuesta” you know it’s expensive.</i> (2, Group 1A)
	Temporality	They detect a change in meaning related to the chronological, extra-linguistic time to which the sentence refers. The difference between sentences 3a and 3b consists in <i>“quisiera” means you want to have it at some point, but in b “quiero” means right now.</i> (3, Group 2E)
	Homonyms	They believe that the verb has two different meanings (semantic difference in the verb stem). The difference between sentences 4a and 4b consists in <i>one is about explaining but the other is telling.</i> (4, Group 2A)

General table of categories and examples			
Category		Description	Examples (sentences, group)
Socio-pragmatic	Register	This is related to the match with the communicative situation and the relationship between the speakers.	The difference between sentences 3a and 3b consists in <i>changing the meaning so that the first is more formal and the second less so.</i> (3, Group 2B)
	Stylistic value	This distinction is a rhetorical, stylistic matter.	The difference between sentences 2a and 2b consists in <i>so they don't repeat the words.</i> (2, Group 1C)
	Communicative situation	This refers to factors in the communicative situation, such as the context or intention.	[...] <i>because both sentences state that they want a loaf of bread.</i> [...] <i>This change happens because they are in a different context.</i> (3, Group 1D)

The complexity of categorising the responses stems from two different aspects. The first difficulty is related to the fact that, as Bliss and Ogborn (1985) note, behind the written words is a meaning that is not directly expressed and the researcher has to guess at it in order to confer a given interpretation. The second difficulty is related to the very characteristics of grammar categories. Following the basic postulates of cognitive linguistics, a dynamic description of language blurs the boundaries between the different levels and shows that the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics, semantics and morphosyntax, and morphosyntax and lexis are permeable and blurred. This difficulty also appears when delimiting what belongs to the morphological, semantic or pragmatic levels, which often have points of convergence. This can be seen in the example below (Table 5), in which the boundaries between what the idea of tense means to students hover between the formal criterion (time associated with verb inflection) and the semantic criterion (the time value of the entire sentence):

**Table 5. Examples of categories related to the idea of tense**

Morphology (prototypical example)	Morphology (peripheral example)	Sentence time (prototypical example)
The difference between sentences 2a and 2b consists of <i>changing the verb tense of one verb in the sentence.</i> (Group 2C)	The difference between sentences 2a and 2b consists in <i>the verb tense in which the sentence is being said (future and present).</i> (Group 1B)	This change happens because <i>changing the tense of the sentences.</i> [...] We say or write the first one in this situation <i>because we show what we want, but not now</i> and the second one <i>we want it right now</i> (Group 2C)

## Results and discussion

### ***Students' knowledge of the subjunctive: Relationships between knowledge of use and conceptualisation***

#### *a. Interpretation of the sentences*

Sentence contrast activities have been proven to be a sentence comprehension activity in which students take an eclectic, multifaceted approach. They tackle sentence interpretation from a wide variety of perspectives, but often holistically and in a contextualised way, barely separating out the different levels of language. They pay attention to morphosyntax, semantics and pragmatics, but in a somewhat disorganised fashion using juxtaposed criteria back and forth with the more global meaning of the sentences in an attempt to articulate the differences they observe.

Generally speaking, students have no difficulty interpreting the first three pairs of sentences, where the mood can be alternated. A full 94% of the answers show that both the older students (4<sup>th</sup> year) and the younger ones (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year) are competent enough as language users that they can perceive the different nuances of meaning supplied by the subjunctive, even though these nuances are quite subtle in some cases. Only 6% of the responses show that the students (in this case, groups in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year) were unable to find differences in meaning in the different moods. In the fourth pair of sentences, where the ungrammatical form appears, the meaning becomes irrelevant to the students as they detect that one of the sentences is impossible. What leaps out in this case is the ungrammaticality, and they no longer deem it important to contrast the meanings.

#### *b. The pragmatic criterion in the construction of meaning*

In order to interpret the sentences they were given, the students relate the grammatical structure with the social context in which it occurs. They do not address the sentences in a decontextualised way (even though they are, *a priori*, contextless sentences) but instead give the sentences meaning by imagining a communicative situation in which they are possible. Their observations show that they view language in a dynamic way that matches the context in which it appears, and they draw from their own experience and their knowledge of the world to interpret the sentence. This happens in the third pair of sentences, which can mean different things in different contexts. What the students do is assign these sentences a context of use and explain their meaning by recreating the situation (Table 6):

**Table 6. *Quisiera / Quiero***

(3). a. <i>Quisiera una barra de pan</i> b. <i>Quiero una barra de pan</i>
"We say or write the first one in this situation <i>when you're in the shop</i> and the second we use it in the same way as the first one." (Group 4D)

Therefore, this is an eminently pragmatic approach since they focus on how the context influences the interpretation of the meaning. They take into consideration both the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that condition the language used (Luquet, 2004) and perceive the verb mood as a mark with pragmatic information that reflects the speaker's intention and guides the recipient's interpretation (Ahern, 2004). They perform an inferential process from the context as their main strategy to interpret the sentences and show knowledge of the characteristics of the communicative situations that these sentences may reflect, along with the elements or factors that should be taken into account: the speaker's intention, point of view and attitude and the attention of the recipient as expressed in the sentences.

Precisely the two groups that found no differences between the sentences were unable to distance themselves from the propositional context and did not contextualise the sentences (Table 7):

**Table 7. *Sepa / Sabe***

(1) a. <i>Busco a un alumno que sepa italiano</i> b. <i>Busco a un alumno que sabe italiano</i>
"The first (1a) and second (1b) sentences [mean] the same because <i>they have the same verb and the verb conjugation changes</i> . The word that changes is <i>sepa</i> and <i>sabe</i> " (Group 2B)

The decontextualised sentences mean nothing to the students. These two groups did the activity and completed it obediently, but it did not activate reflection on either meaning or form. They stayed at the literal meaning of the sentence, which prevented them from understanding it and diverted them from the route of reflection.

These results seem to show that 1) in order to reflect on sentences, their meaning must be understood, and in order for their meaning to be understood, they must refer to situations of real use, and 2) in order to interpret them, we must gain some distance from them and de-automate the task, and this means activating reflection on language. Therefore, reflection is shown to be a powerful tool to improve use, in this case sentence interpretation, while referring to real uses also makes it possible to reflect on how the language system works.

Extra-linguistic knowledge and the re-creation of the context of use are thus revealed to be the previous steps needed to interpret the sentences and to activate metalinguistic reflection. However, in itself this strategy is not enough to trigger active reflection on the phenomenon of mood choice if it is not accompanied by other strategies that enable diverse criteria to be brought into play. In fact, what we can glean from the students' answers is that the pragmatic content is powerful enough that at times it has a secondary effect on reflection on language: it makes the structure underlying the meaning transparent and thus invisible, such that the situation represented is so important that the students even perceive nonexistent grammar structures. This is the only logical interpretation of the answers of some groups who detected questions or orders in sentences where there are no interrogative or imperative language markers. This is the case of a first-year group (1C), which sees a question in sentence 3a, *Quisiera una barra de pan*, because they imagine a situation – the action of buying a loaf of bread – in which it is common to formulate the request with a question, *¿Me pone una barra de pan?* (Could I have a loaf of bread?). This is also the case of another first-year group (1B), who believe that the polite form of address (*usted*) is used when there are no markers that refer to the person to whom the sentence is addressed.

*c. Judgements of ungrammaticality: From use to reflection on use*

When faced with ungrammatical sentences, the students appeal to their implicit knowledge of how the language works as competent users (71% of the students indicated that sentence 4b, *\*Quiero que me lo cuentas*, is ungrammatical), and only after that do they try a more analytical approach. These students show implicit knowledge of the language that tells them that a given form is incorrect, and only by de-automating this knowledge do they become aware of the reason and try to justify it by activating all their intuitive and declarative knowledge: morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, with differing degrees of consciousness and knowledge. They show very high rule competence not only regarding the ungrammaticality of some structures but also regarding situations when pragmatic, sociolinguistic or conversational rules are broken, such as when they deem that sentence 3b, *Quiero una barra de pan*, is not appropriate for the situation because they believe that it is impolite in the communicative context they have imagined.

However, the shift from a user's consciousness telling them what is possible or not to a grammatical consciousness in which they have to analyse the reason, appears to be more difficult for the students and leaves evidence of the gaps in their grammatical knowledge. The groups that detected no problem of ungrammaticality in sentence 4b (18%, which means one group per level) show that they have not interpreted the

sentences, that they are examining them in a decontextualised way and that they are therefore incapable of realising that these sentences are not, in fact, possible. Once again, we see the need to start with meaning in order to make metalinguistic reflection activities meaningful and to de-automate our view of language.

#### *d. Multiplicity of criteria*

The students pay attention to many different aspects when completing the assignment (an average of 9.25 different criteria in the entire class per pair of sentences, and 2.6 criteria per group). This multiplicity of criteria shows a rich, kaleidoscopic view that acknowledges the complexity of the grammar content they are analysing. The criteria they use pertain to different levels of language, which enables us to infer that the students tackle these alternating sentences from complementary perspectives and with the desire to go from the more global meaning to a more analytical view of the language phenomenon.

However, these criteria are used in a cumulative, not critical, way. The complementariness of criteria is not accompanied by an organisation that would enable them to understand the relationships among them. What is more, some of these criteria show very low metalinguistic mastery on the part of the students, with highly superficial knowledge that prevents them from engaging in elaborate reflection.

#### *e. Attention to form*

The formal criterion is used by 67% of the groups to justify the shift between the two sentences, but it is presented in a very superficial way, either as a simple statement of the spelling/phonological change that has taken place or as a morphological change that affects the verb or verb conjugation, without any further details (Table 8):

**Table 8. *Sepa/ Sabe***

(1) a. <i>Busco a un alumno que sepa italiano</i> b. <i>Busco a un alumno que sabe italiano</i>
“The difference between sentences 1a and 1b consists in the verb conjugation” (Group 1D)
“The difference between sentences 1a and 1b consists in the time of the tenses changes” (Group 2C)

Based on their responses, what emerges is a notion of verb tense which includes the grammatical notions of tense, aspect and mood, indiscriminately. The students never mention verb mood by itself, even though it is the only notion that changes in the majority of sentences. They show very fragile, simplified knowledge of verb morphology, an aspect

corroborated by the results of previous studies (Durán, 2009a), which was also detected in the studies by Casas (2012) and Torralba (2012) set in primary schools. The morphological argument becomes somewhat useless because they have not consolidated enough knowledge to allow them to go beyond a mere statement of a paradigm shift. We believe that this shows that to students verb paradigms have no explanation; they are simply part of their rote knowledge, which enables them to identify the different verb forms. They have not constructed in-depth knowledge of verbs.

The syntactic criterion only appears when it is meaningful for the students, specifically in the case of subordinate noun clauses (sentence pair 4), where precisely the indicative form is impossible for syntactic reasons. This criterion is used by one-third of the groups (around 35%), but it is revealed to be even more fragile than their morphological knowledge. The students show very limited metasyntactic competence, a competence that, however, is closely related to school instruction (Gombert, 1990, p. 39). Their use-based knowledge indicates that there is a syntactic problem (“The word *cuentas* does not fit with the others”, 1D; “It tries to express the same thing but is not well constructed”, 4A), but despite their attempts, they do not show declarative knowledge that is solid enough to justify the reason (“The 1<sup>st</sup> part of the compound sentence does not agree with the 2<sup>nd</sup> part in gender and number”, 4B) and once again they resort to use by manipulating the structures to show that they are not possible (“We believe that if we remove the words *quiero que* we would be left with *¿Me lo cuentas?*, which we would use for the same purpose as the first sentence”, 4D). In this case, we can see a gradual rise in the emergence of syntactic criteria depending on the students’ level (17% of the answers that refer to this criterion come from the first year, 33% from the second and 50% from the fourth), which we can associate with school instruction, but we can also observe a great deal of difficulty when justifying it.

In short, the students show very little ability to reflect on the form that contains the content of the texts, a capacity that appears to be limited due to the lack of solidity of their declarative knowledge of the language, especially concerning verbs and even more specifically verb mood. This difficulty when observing the formal aspects of language contrasts with the attention paid to it in both primary education (Casas, 2012; Torralba, 2012) and secondary education (Adell, 2007). That is, we are faced with the paradox that even though schools emphasise the formal aspect of language when teaching and learning verbs, the students do not seem to have appropriated this knowledge.

*f. Description of verb mood: The construction of the notion*

Barth (2001) points out that three elements make up the structure of an abstract concept: a) the name of the concept, b) a combination of its



essential and non-essential attributes and c) a series of examples through which we can see it embodied. If we accept this, we can conclude that the students have not constructed the notion of verb mood because, to begin with, the term never appears (that is, they have no label by which to call it). Neither *mood* nor *subjunctive* nor *indicative* seem to be part of the lexis they use when referring to verb forms in which precisely only the mood changes. We concur with Ruiz Bikandi (2010, p. 45) that “there is no solid knowledge of the object if one is unable to name it properly when speaking about it”. We believe that this is related to the difficulty of separating the notion of verb mood from the notions of tense and aspect, so we believe that in reality the notion that the students mention is *verb tense*, given the place it occupies in the verb paradigm.

In contrast, the students do show an awareness of many of the values of the subjunctive in contrast to the indicative, and they are often capable of observing its essential attributes based on the three processes involved in conceptualisation: perception, inference and comparison (Barth, 2001). Thus, depending on the language problem posed, they detect the features of non-specificity, non-assertiveness and non-present as essential attributes of the subjunctive, which also match the features that many linguists attribute to the subjunctive. They are also capable of realising the syntactic need for the subjunctive in some of the constructions, along with the clearly courteous meaning of some of the subjunctive forms (Table 9).

**Table 9. *Quisiera / Quiero***

(3) a. <i>Quisiera</i> una barra de pan b. <i>Quiero</i> una barra de pan
“We say or write the former in this situation <i>when we are asking more politely, more respectfully, and the latter when we are ordering someone</i> ” (Group 4B)

Some of the criteria used, such as the reference to sentence mood, enable us to infer that the students forge a direct relationship between mood and modality. The subjunctive enables students to interpret the speaker’s attitude towards the sentence, and in their answers they show – with differing degrees of awareness – that mood and modality are inextricably intertwined.

### ***Metalinguistic activity in a language reflection task***

#### *a. The influence of instructional intervention on the emergence of students’ metalinguistic activity*

The results show that the instructional device is useful to activate students’ metalinguistic knowledge, stir up their prior knowledge,

connect with their implicit grammatical knowledge and, in short, help reflection emerge. It does not allow them to respond automatically, but it does require them to reconsider the difference between the two sentences and to describe this difference based on a variety of perspectives and through all the means available to them, albeit with different degrees of explicitness and varied results.

However, this activity does not always lead all groups to gain awareness. In some cases (6%), the students tackle the activity automatically, without reflecting on it. In other cases, even though the students are given questions, they are not enough to get them to realise the different values of the subjunctive. The activity itself becomes an engine for reflection, but is not enough to push the students towards an understanding of the mood values of the subjunctive. Nor is peer interaction enough. Instead, the intervention of an expert – the teacher as a mediator and guide – is needed to “stretch” what comes from the students and accompany them in the process of abstraction and systematisation through the zone of proximal development.

The inclusion of an ungrammatical sentence in the design of the activity gives rise to another consideration: detecting the error does not require a high level of reflection – Gombert (1990) situates this behaviour on the epilinguistic level – and in some cases it even inhibits reflection. The students appealed to their linguistic competence as language users to reject the ungrammatical form, and many of them believed that this criterion was so valid that no arguments were needed to justify the reason why it is wrong, whereas this justification would indeed require a high level of reflection and metalinguistic awareness. The students showed highly disparate levels of awareness, ranging from those who only noted that one of the forms is wrong to those who indicated the reason (Table 10):

**Table 10. *Cuentas / Cuentas***

(4) a. <i>Quiero que me lo cuentas</i> b. <i>*Quiero que me lo cuentas</i>		
Criterion	Number of groups	Examples
Use and implicit user awareness	2	...sentence 4b doesn't sound right at all (Group 1B)
Lack of meaning	8	...it makes no sense (Group 1A)
Rule	9	...it is wrong (Group 2D)
Communicative context	2	... this sentence wouldn't occur in any situation (Group 1D)
Meaning of the tense	2	The sentence tense is changed and the second one ends up being meaningless, since the speaker asks to be told at that very moment (Group 2D)

Morphology	4	<i>... The difference between sentences 4a and 4b consists in changing the verb conjugation [...] one of the words is conjugated incorrectly (Group 2B)</i>
Syntactic relationship	6	<i>...in the sentence the word "cuentas" doesn't fit with the others (Group 1D)</i>
Sentence mood	1	<i>The second is trying to express the same thing but the sentence isn't properly constructed. In the second sentence, the verb "cuentas" should be in the conditional, but not in the desiderative (Group 4A)</i>

Finally, we should note that the students were asked to do an activity that is unusual for them. We believe that sentence contrasts and group work arouse an interest in resolving the activity and make it possible for students to de-automate the way they look at language, and that grammar activities "qui sont d'ailleurs une telle source d'intérêt, voire de jouissance" (Trévisé, 1996, p. 7). In short, the instructional device places them in a situation that entails interpreting, describing and explaining what they perceive in the mood alternation based on use. It therefore requires them to explain what they usually do intuitively and not very consciously. Thus, we believe that this way of approaching grammar work in the classroom can contribute to the emergence of metalinguistic activity in students because 1) it gives them awareness of the language phenomenon and therefore makes language opaque to them, 2) it enables some of the obstacles and difficulties that students face to come to the surface, and 3) it lays the groundwork for building a bridge between knowledge based on use and declarative knowledge.

What we can conclude from all of this is that to develop a reflective attitude towards language phenomena, we must create educational contexts that ensure active student participation where grammar learning is not viewed as detached from use but is precisely based on use and on students' prior knowledge, and dealing with it in a way that allows for an approach that encompasses a variety of criteria. In short, it requires an instructional approach based on student activity and includes aids to accompany them in the process of reflection.

#### *b. The levels of metalinguistic activity*

The metalinguistic activity inferred from the written answers is not homogeneous either among groups of students or within the texts from the same group. They show degrees of differing levels of awareness about language, abstraction and explanation, ranging from comments that show that the students are very "attached" to their implicit knowledge of how the linguistic system works and justify changes by appealing to the knowledge they have as users (such as the judgements on the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of the sentences in which the students state that the

sentence is not correct because “it just doesn’t sound right”) to responses that show a high degree of awareness and a capacity for abstraction by the students (“the second aims to express the same but the sentence isn’t well constructed. In the second sentence, the verb ‘cuentas’ could be used in a conditional sentence, but not in a desiderative one”).

This is not a chronological, progressive process; it does not mean that they begin with less awareness and gradually gain more as they do the activity. Instead, we concur with the model of metalinguistic activity levels set forth by Camps (2000), Camps and Milian (2000) and Camps *et al.* (2000), which posits that these levels coexist in flux within the same task and the same students. This is not a continuum which unfolds chronologically but instead manifestations of this activity can actually coexist in the same individual almost at the same time depending on the actions being performed: speaking, writing, observing, revising while negotiating meaning, analysing language (Milian, 2005, p. 16).

In this way, we can observe automated procedural knowledge that is less accessible to the consciousness, but a moment earlier or later we can see attempts to gain distance from it and come up with an explanation. This is often based on procedural knowledge, their use of the language, the part that is automated and internalised, and from that they begin to venture hypotheses or explanations that show awareness of the language phenomenon. As Karmiloff-Smith (1992) noted, the information found explicitly *in* the mind becomes explicit knowledge *for* the mind. Sometimes, however, a fluctuating movement through different levels of awareness and explicitness can be seen according to the specific feature being observed.

Nor do we believe that this is a movement from the unconscious to the conscious, as if they were clearly distinct levels. As van Lier (1998) and Gombert (2006) noted, we believe that the boundaries between the epilinguistic (or unconscious) level and the metalinguistic (or conscious) level are not rigid and that, at least in the case of adolescent students who have already had some sort of grammatical instruction, these boundaries are very difficult to define. We concur with van Lier that they are actually not boundaries at all but a continuum that allows for multiple levels of consciousness and even juxtapositions. For example, the students’ references to use are not very abstract (in fact, Gombert situates the influence of context on the epilinguistic level), yet we can also notice that not all the references to use have the same degree of abstraction.

We believe that in terms of research, we should distinguish and establish the relationships – which are complex – between the metalinguistic activity performed by students and the metalinguistic knowledge that emerges in this activity, in terms of both their previous knowledge and the

re-elaboration of this knowledge in the reflection process. There might be a great deal of metalinguistic activity with little explicit knowledge of the language and vice-versa: the metalinguistic activity can come with little reflection. We are thinking, for example, of the signs of intense metalinguistic activity by the students in their first year of primary school, who have very little declarative knowledge of the language (Bigas and Gil, 2009; Gil, 2010 and 2011). Likewise, we should distinguish between metalinguistic activity and metalinguistic discourse (Camps, 2013), since intense metalinguistic activity can occur with simple verbalisation, and conversely we can find the use of specific, elaborate language with little metalinguistic reflection.

### ***The construction of metalinguistic discourse and the use of metalanguage***

Even though the analysis starts with the same target – the written discourse generated by students when talking about the language – we follow Culioli (1990) and Camps (2000) by distinguishing between the metalinguistic activity we can infer that the students are using when doing the assignment and the levels of awareness it reveals and how they actually verbalise this activity. Metalinguistic activity is related to the operations that individuals perform, and it can be verbalised or not using specific language via metalinguistic discourse, that is, discourse whose referent is language itself. We have already discussed metalinguistic activity in the previous point, and now we shall centre on the discourse the students generate, and especially on what metalanguage they use to speak about the language, while bearing in mind that the construction of a specific language to refer to itself is part of the process of conceptualising grammatical concepts (Barth, 2001).

As various authors have pointed out (Gombert, 1990; Karmiloff-Smith, 1992; Camps, 2000; Camps *et al.*, 2005; Myhill, 2011), the level of metalinguistic consciousness is related to the capacity to verbalise knowledge about language. All the models of metalinguistic development believe that the highest level corresponds to the speaker using specific terminology to refer to language. This is an abstraction that situates the highest metalinguistic awareness at this level, but we believe that this requires more subtlety. The results of the study we have presented – which corroborate those of previous studies on the same topic (Myhill, 2011; Rodríguez Gonzalo, 2011) – show that when students use specific terminology this terminology does not necessarily correspond to a high level of metalinguistic awareness or at least a higher level than those who do not use the same terminology. Sometimes the students use a given term erroneously or in a way that does not imply that they have learned the grammatical notions to which the terms refer. Likewise, they use terms

without much reflection. This is what Myhill (2011) calls “metalinguistic knowledge without metalinguistic understanding”. That is, metalanguage itself is not a guarantee of learning or intense metalinguistic activity if it is not grounded upon solid knowledge of the grammatical contents to which it refers.

Verbalisation shows an attempt to appropriate the notion of mood, and it provides invaluable information on difficulties in this process. In the students’ reflections, we can observe that they use very little specific language, that it is very limited and that sometimes it reveals an erroneous or partial understanding of the notions to which these terms refer. This is the case of these fourth-year students (Group 4B), who try to explain the syntactic impossibility of sentence 4b by using metalanguage which does not match the linguistic phenomenon observed, but that does show an attempt to grapple with it (Table 11):

**Table 11. *Cuentas* / \**Cuentas***

(4) a. <i>Quiero que me lo cuentas</i> b. * <i>Quiero que me lo cuentas</i>
[...] the first part of the compound sentence does not agree with the second part in either gender or number. (Grup 4B)

To deal with these terminological – and conceptual – difficulties, the students resort to everyday language to discuss the linguistic phenomenon based on their knowledge as users of the language, in a fluctuation between this more intuitive versus more academic knowledge (Table 12):

**Table 12. *Cuentas* / \**Cuentas***

(4) a. <i>Quiero que me lo cuentas</i> b. * <i>Quiero que me lo cuentas</i>
[...] in the sentence the word “cuentas” doesn’t fit with the others. (Group 1D)

There is also evidence that the terminology, which is based on metalinguistic understanding itself – as the language they use to explain the pragmatic relationships that justify the mood alternation – helps them to observe and reflect on the language (Table 13):

**Table 13. *Quisiera* / *Quiero***

(3) a. <i>Quisiera una barra de pan</i> b. <i>Quiero una barra de pan</i>
[...] “changing the register from formal to informal, respectively” (Group 2C)

In short, the students show many difficulties speaking about the verb and the mood system specifically and about language in general, yet they

also reveal mechanisms to deal with some of these difficulties. We believe that some of these difficulties have to do with the fact that they are not used to speaking about the language and they have no discursive models to do so. We believe that a classroom where grammar is taught based on a socio-constructivist approach must be sure to create spaces where speaking about the language is meaningful to students, and it should be keenly aware of the teacher's need to provide students with models of verbalised metalinguistic activity which is grounded upon this fluctuation between everyday concepts and the scholarly concepts of the discipline.

## **Implications of the results**

From our results, we can glean three main considerations, which we shall synthesise below and associate with the research questions outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

- To reflect actively on mood contrast, the students need to understand the meaning of the sentences, and for this to be possible the sentences should be based on situations of real use. At the same time, they need distance from the sentences in order to interpret them, yielding activating reflection on language. Therefore, reflection has been shown to be a powerful tool to help improve use, in this case in sentence interpretation, while referring to real uses makes it possible to reflect on how the language system works.
- The shift from a user's awareness that enables them to detect the subtle, complex values of mood alternation to grammatical awareness was shown to be difficult for the students, and they revealed gaps in their grammatical knowledge in terms of both their appropriation of the concepts and the terminology they used to refer to them, as well as gaps in the discursive structures that enabled them to express this reflection.
- Peer interaction was shown to be necessary yet insufficient in the conceptualisation process; we discovered the importance of expert intervention – the teacher as both mediator and guide – to “pull out” what emerges from the students and assist them in the process.

These reflections and the results outlined in the previous sections enable us to posit several instructional implications regarding teaching and learning verb mood specifically and grammar in general:

- a) Students' difficulties in identifying the grammar category of verb mood and the relationships it indicates with the speaker's attitude as expressed by the subjunctive leads us to believe that verb mood should not be presented in secondary classrooms disassociated with



- other verb morphemes or from the notion of mood. This association with the other grammar categories of verbs should help the students to grasp that the verb paradigm is not arbitrarily distributed; rather it reflects formal considerations that have repercussions on meaning, and these forms can take on different meanings depending on the context in which they appear. The relationships between mood and modality should also be made explicit, and this means forging relationships between sentence-level and text-level grammar, and between grammar and pragmatics, which would enable us to frame grammar teaching and learning in relation to its discursive uses. Finally, the notion of verb mood is a category that requires a high degree of abstraction and is complex for students to grasp. We must be aware of its epistemic difficulties so we can bear them in mind and scaffold the difficulty (Fisher, 2004), beginning with the more prototypical examples which enable us to view its essential attributes and then moving gradually to more peripheral examples, similar to the approach of cognitive grammar (Langacker, 1987) and prototype theory (Rosch, 1978; Cuenca and Hilferty, 1999).
- b) Students' metalinguistic activity should be the engine and foundation of grammar teaching, since conscious reflection on how language works is what makes it possible to better interpret sentences, and it therefore empowers students to improve their language use. We should start with the students' previous knowledge, with the observation and manipulation of language structures, and with the students' ability to hypothesise how the language system works, before moving on to construct more scientific and especially more systematic knowledge of the language, which integrates the learners' language intuition while also going beyond it. We support Milian and Camps when they state that "learning grammar means acquiring reasoned knowledge of how language works" and that "teaching grammar consists of building bridges between intuitive, implicit, manipulative, verbalised knowledge with everyday words and systematised knowledge of language and its uses" (Milian and Camps, 2006, p. 27).
  - c) In this sense, we believe that it is crucial to design instructional devices that allow reflection to emerge while avoiding the automated, simplified tasks so commonly found in textbooks. Favourable contexts must be created in the classroom where speaking and writing about grammar is meaningful for students, situations which allow students to verbalise their knowledge under construction and the teacher to guide them towards abstraction. Along the same lines, we suggest that we teachers should create our own discursive genres with models of metalinguistic argumentation



that enable students to speak about linguistic phenomena using the right metalanguage, while also integrating the everyday language which, as noted above in the conclusions, the students use to grapple with phenomena whose names they do not know.

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