

# AAUSC 2008 Volume

## Conceptions of L2 Grammar: Theoretical Approaches and their Application in the L2 Classroom

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## Chapter 9

# A Conceptual Approach to Promoting L2 Grammatical Development: Implications for Language Program Directors

Eduardo Negueruela, University of Miami

### Introduction: Language Program Directors, Grammar Teaching, and a Conceptual Approach

The debate over the importance of grammar in the second language (L2) classroom is a complex issue that needs to be addressed by language program directors (LPDs) and language teachers. As an LPD in a large Spanish program, I am often confronted with the following question coming from both novice and experienced teachers: “Should we teach grammar or not?” Indeed, a similar question has emerged in almost all beginning-of-semester teaching orientations and language teaching workshops that I have conducted. The role of grammar teaching is not a new issue in the language classroom. However, positing the grammar question in such general terms is not always helpful when approaching a complex pedagogical issue that often provokes heated debates among novice and experienced L2 teachers alike. Teachers and scholars in applied linguistics who bring a more holistic approach to the teaching of L2 written and oral communication have already pointed out that grammar teaching “goes far beyond YES grammar—NO grammar” (Van Lier, 2001, p. 256; see also Katz & Blyth, 2007).

This chapter addresses the issue of grammar teaching in a specific context: a L2 classroom where one aims to teach language as a sociocultural activity. In such a class, meaning making through written and oral communication as well as understanding culture through focusing on literacy (i.e., the teaching of texts as rich repositories of culture that bring historical and social relevance to the learning of new languages) are the priorities in the curriculum.

To address the issue of grammar teaching in such L2 classrooms, this chapter outlines three basic steps: (1) a linguistic step, by defining grammar as a grammar of meanings; (2) a learnability step, by understanding the learning of grammar as the internalization of conceptual categories to be used as tools of the mind; and (3) a pedagogical step, by articulating four pedagogical principles that LPDs and instructors may implement to begin thinking about how to promote L2 communicative development—in this case, grammar development—as the internalization of tools of the mind. Undoubtedly, the critical issue is transforming thinking *in or about* concepts into thinking *through* concepts. In other words, the issue is not being able to think about a specific grammatical, pragmatic, or stylistic issue in sophisticated terms, but rather developing an understanding that can

be applied to think through that specific concept when constructing meaning in written and oral communication.

A conceptual approach to language teaching requires understanding L2 development as a conceptual process in the Vygotskian sense (Vygotsky, 1986). Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind, this chapter defines teachable grammar—that is, grammar that should be taught in a coherent and systematic fashion in the L2 classroom—as a grammar of categories of meaning. Language-awareness activities should focus on teaching grammar based on concepts that explain language meaning (versus a grammar of morphology or a grammar of syntax). Pedagogically, it is not enough to provide coherent and systematic semantic explanations to learners, because the challenge of transforming inert explanations into conceptual tools with functionality remains to be addressed (Karpov, 2003).

This chapter first proposes that L2 instructors teach grammatical features based on semantic categories that allow learners to construct meaning with agency. Communicative agency implies being aware of our linguistic choices: We choose language, and not the other way around. This linguistic awareness should foster linguistic control—that is, orienting the development of communicative abilities through understanding the semantic implications of linguistic choices in written and oral discourse. Second, to understand how grammar meanings become meaning-making tools, a conceptual approach to grammar teaching is connected with sociocultural psychology in the field of L2 learning (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) through Vygotsky's notions of internalization and mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). The notion of internalization through mediation allows us to understand the importance of concepts in the development of verbal thinking and their critical role in the development of consciousness (see Vygotsky, 2004). To achieve this purpose, a third step is required: understanding the process of promoting conceptual development in the L2 classroom.

## The Hybrid Quality of L2 Pedagogical Grammars

A first important step in approaching the issue of grammar teaching in the L2 classroom is to define grammar as concretely as possible. As Katz and Blyth explain, "it is perplexing that the term 'grammar' means different things to different people depending on their perspectives and backgrounds" (2007, p. 11). Teachers (or scholars) do not necessarily share a common understanding of what grammar is or how it should be taught. In fact, many language teachers find concepts such as grammar, language, communication, culture, and literacy either too obvious to require definition or too theoretical to be applied in concrete terms to the classroom. When pushed to create definitions, it becomes clear that individuals understand such general constructs differently. More important, what we understand (or do not understand) conditions our teaching practices. Defining grammar teaching is one of the first essential steps to take, because novice and experienced teachers alike may find themselves referring to different constructs when planning, teaching, and reflecting critically on pedagogical approaches.

This chapter focuses on L2 pedagogical grammars, and specifically on the explanations presented in current textbooks for the teaching and learning of Spanish. L2 grammatical explanations are designed to be used by teachers when explaining language and to be internalized by learners when attempting to understand a second language. Such explanations center on grammar topics that teachers and scholars have found to be challenging for learners. Grammatical explanations in L2 textbooks are eclectic, with descriptions, categories, rules, and explanations coming from different grammatical traditions. Their explanations are generally a mixture of prescriptive, descriptive, metalinguistic, and contrastive principles/rules that explain language to L2 learners (see also Odlin, 1994 for information on pedagogical grammars).

In the language classroom, grammatical explanations are always present in one form or another. Their prominence varies depending on the pedagogical approach being used. Nevertheless, even the most agrammatical communicative classroom generally includes some type of grammatical explanations, if only through its textbooks. These textbook grammatical explanations may be intended only for learners' study at home, or they may be created for classroom discussion and practice. At any rate, grammatical explanations play a consistent role in language courses.

L2 explanations for both teachers and learners of a second language have three basic qualities: metalinguistic, contrastive, and usage based. Metalanguage grammar derives from grammatical traditions with a long history. Indeed, Dionysius Thrax of Alexandria was one of the first scholars both to codify the part-of-speech tradition and to compile a pedagogical grammar for the learning of Latin. Metalanguage grammar consists of notions used by grammarians and teachers to explain how words behave the way they do in specific linguistic environments—be it a sentence, a paragraph, a text, or an utterance (although most grammatical explanations are provided at the sentence level).

The most common categories explained and present in most, if not all, L2 textbooks are grammatical functions (e.g., subject, objects, clauses), parts of speech (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles, prepositions, conjunctions), and basic grammatical relations (e.g., transitive and intransitive verbs). Most of these notions are based on the work of Roman and Greek scholars from the first centuries. Almost two millennia after its origin, language teachers generally perceive metalanguage grammar to be important. Utterances such as “My students don't even know what a direct object is, so how are we supposed to teach them grammar in Spanish?” are frequently heard in instructors' meetings. In the end, teaching students to identify direct objects may not be especially complicated, but teachers' reporting/complaining about the absence of metalinguistic knowledge on the part of students seems to be a common occurrence.

A second feature of L2 grammatical explanations is the use of contrastive explanations organized on the basis of similarities and differences between the target language and the students' L1.<sup>1</sup> From a pedagogical perspective, it is certainly logical to emphasize and explain issues that are problematic to L2 learners, because languages grammaticalize different meanings through different structures. In the case of Spanish, *ser/estar*, indicative/subjunctive, and preterite/imperfect

are three of the well-known canonical issues present in all L2 textbook for anglophone learners.

The third quality of L2 pedagogical grammar explanations is that they are usage based. Grammar explanations are often formulated as rules of usage that attempt to capture the contexts where a specific grammatical feature is found. In many cases, these explanations are based on rules of thumb, which are well-intentioned simplifications that attempt to capture the meaning and use of a grammatical feature. Rules of thumb take many shapes: descriptions of contexts where the grammar feature is used, descriptions of the meanings expressed, first-language equivalents of the issue under study, and other similar strategies to capture and explain the meaning and significance of a challenging L2 grammatical point. Unfortunately, the rule-of-thumb approach to explaining language often fails to capture with consistency and coherence the conceptual meaning of the grammatical point at hand (see Negueruela & Lantolf, 2006, for more on the teaching of the Spanish preterit/imperfect, and Negueruela, 2008, for a discussion of the teaching of the Spanish indicative/subjunctive).

## Applied Linguistics and Pedagogical Grammar Research

Research on L2 pedagogical grammar, where scholars work at finding suitable explanations for the L2 classroom, was perceived as a critical task by linguists and applied language scholars until the 1970s (e.g., Bull, 1965; Bolinger, 1991, in Spanish). Unfortunately, work in pedagogical grammar that is directly addressed to language teachers seems to have been discontinued with some exceptions (see Whitley, 2002, for a review of Spanish/English contrastive research). The reason for the decline of research on pedagogical grammars in mainstream work in linguistics and applied linguistics today is a topic of research itself.

Two hypotheses may be advanced to explain the lack of more current research in L2 pedagogical grammars in the United States. First, during the 1960s and 1970s, leading figures in the field of linguistics opposed abandoning theoretical enterprises to concentrate on pedagogical issues. As a consequence, scholars were expected to work on explaining “Language”—and not on explaining languages to students.

Second, the communicative language teaching framework was interpreted to mean focusing on communication, with grammar teaching either partially or fully eliminated from the classroom. Interestingly enough, even when a zero approach to teaching grammar was advocated by some methodologies—mainly the “natural approach” (see Terrell, 1995 based on a hypothesis advanced by Krashen, 1985)—and even when the teaching of overt grammar was anathema to the teaching of communication, grammar explanations remained an important part of textbooks. For example, in Terrell, Andrade, Egasse, and Muñoz (2006), the most well-known textbook advocating the natural approach based on the zero grammar proposal for teaching Spanish, one finds extensive grammatical explanations that learners are intended to study for homework. In the end,

the natural approach does not advocate the elimination of grammar teaching from language courses, but proposes devoting valuable classroom time to communicative interactions.

The explanation of why research on L2 pedagogical grammars has not been part of mainstream applied linguistics scholarship in the last few years is an important question (see Lafford, 2000, for a review of the history of Spanish applied linguistics in the twentieth century). Suffice it to say, a conceptual approach to the teaching of grammar needs to be accompanied by language-specific research on L2 pedagogical grammars. Finding coherent, systematic, and teachable explanations of languages is a first and necessary research task in which teachers and scholars need to reengage themselves by following up on the work initiated by academics such as Bull and Bolinger in the 1960s and 1970s in Spanish, among many others (see also Gass, Bardovi-Harlig, Magnan, & Walz, 2002).

Current work in the field of theoretical linguistics, however, is still relevant for L2 pedagogical grammars. Linguistic grammars—that is, explanations of language that attempt to explain the very essence of language based on different philosophical assumptions—are not generally intended for teachers or learners, but rather for linguists. As such, these elaborations are based on specific philosophical traditions and approach the study of language from vastly different angles. Linguists working in a variety of paradigms may contribute to studies in applied linguistics and the teaching of grammar. A variety of theoretical approaches based on functional linguistics in its different versions (Halliday, 1978, contains probably the most well-known paradigm regarding functionality) and cognitive linguistics (e.g., Talmy, 2001; Langacker, 1987), may provide critical insights into these matters for language teachers.

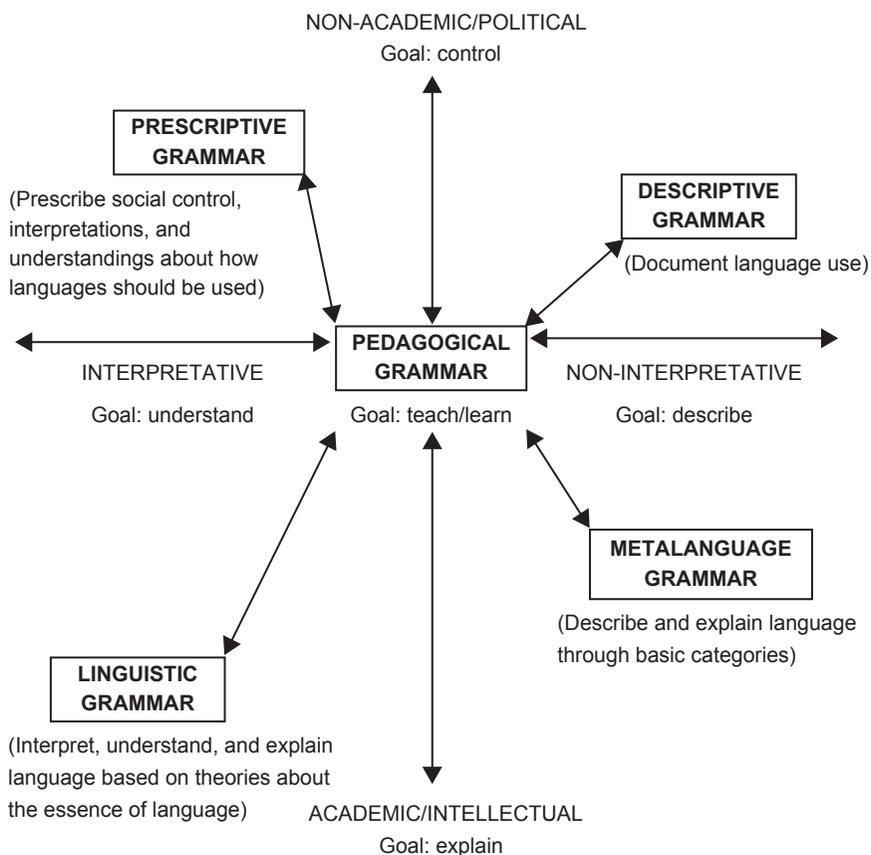
The relevance of various theoretical paradigms and their linguistic grammars for creating pedagogical grammars logically depends on the ease of applicability of their proposals to the language classrooms. Some linguistic explanations coming from specific paradigms have been productive in the L2 classroom (e.g., functional linguistics in the teaching of writing; see Martin, 1989), whereas other paradigms (e.g., generative linguistics) have had practically no impact on the teaching profession. In the latter case, the explanations of these paradigms simply are not designed to be used for the teaching of languages.

## The Relationship between Pedagogical Grammars and Other Types of Grammars

Figure 1 graphically depicts the hybrid quality of L2 pedagogical grammars. The goal of current pedagogical grammars is practical: to explain language so that languages can be taught and learned. Pedagogical grammars are also constructed based on principles, categories, and rules coming from the other grammatical traditions. The relationship of pedagogical grammars to prescriptive, descriptive, linguistic, and metalanguage grammars obviously relies on the shared goal of all linguistic enterprises: understanding language.

**Figure 1**

Goals of prescriptive, descriptive, linguistic, and metalanguage grammars and their connections to pedagogical grammars



Each type of grammar differs as to its audience and its primary goal:

- A prescriptive grammar interprets and attempts to control the linguistic behavior of speakers in specific social contexts by proposing how a language should be used.
- A descriptive grammar documents and describes language use within a specific community.
- A metalanguage grammar describes and explains language through different categories (e.g., subject, object, clause) and properties (e.g., transitivity).
- A linguistic grammar attempts to explain and understand language through theoretical analyses and philosophical assumptions.

The basic connections and disconnections among all four types of grammars may be captured along two continua: from academic to non-academic (or divulgative), and from interpretative to non-interpretative (or descriptive). Figure 1 also

constructs the interdependent relationships between different types of grammar and their primary goals.

In the end, we find prescriptions, descriptions, interpretations, and metalanguage in textbook L2 grammar explanations, which are based in a variety of philosophical and applied traditions. Furthermore, the fact that a grammar is theoretical or academic does not imply its lack of applicability in other realms. The most abstract linguistic descriptions may be relevant to pedagogical grammars. For instance, certain explanations coming from theoretical linguistics, such as the cognitive linguistic notion of explaining language through categories of meaning, are relevant to pedagogical grammars. The inverse is true as well: Certain explanations originating from pedagogical grammars may also be relevant to linguistic grammars.

## Simplified Explanations in L2 Grammar Textbooks

The quality of pedagogical grammar explanations varies considerably. Put simply, L2 grammatical explanations are generally eclectic. Within a conceptual approach to grammar teaching, the quality of the explanations that learners receive in the L2 classroom, whether through textbooks or through instructors' explanations (which are generally inspired by these textbooks), is a critical element in developing learners' conceptual understandings of the target language. Unfortunately, the issue as to which type of explanations learners should receive has not received as much attention as it should in applied linguistics research.

The conventional historical narrative of the recent developments of foreign language teaching methodologies in North America explains that, after the 1960s, a general dissatisfaction with mechanistic approaches to the teaching of language arose. As mentioned earlier, the communicative language movement, with its innovative methodologies, was essential in helping teachers approach the teaching of languages as the teaching of communication. Since then, language teachers have been encouraged to prioritize communication through meaningful contextualized activities in the L2 classroom.

In practical terms, although communication is the main concern in many instructed contexts, grammar explanations persist in most L2 courses. Even when instructors devote most of their actual teaching time to communicative practice, at the very least, L2 learners are usually asked to study from the textbook the grammatical point to be used in class. Learners then construct their own understandings based on such explanations. Consequently, some important questions need to be asked:

- How is grammar or language constructed through the explanations given to learners through textbooks?
- Are these explanations complete, systematic, and accurate?
- How are grammatical meanings constructed based on the grammatical rules provided in textbooks?

A quick perusal of L2 grammar explanations found in elementary and intermediate Spanish textbooks illuminates the inconsistencies of the grammatical

rules provided to learners to help them understand the complexities of the target language. Whitley (2002), based on Bull's (1965) and Bolinger's (1991) scholarship, points out that most of the frequent explanations of canonical issues, such as the Spanish preterit/imperfect, Spanish articles, and the *ser/estar* distinction, are not complete, coherent, or systematic. Nevertheless, the same types of explanations continue to be replicated in today's textbooks.

Focusing on definite articles in Spanish illustrates the challenges of teaching grammar using well-intentioned but overtly simplistic rules. Elementary books generally explain articles using a simple equivalence: The English article "the" corresponds to "el, la, los, las" (e.g., Rodríguez, Samaniego, Blommers, Lagunas-Solar, & Ritzi-Maraouf, 2006; Hershberger, Navey-Davis, & Borrás, 2008; Heining-Boyno & Cowell, 2009). Intermediate Spanish textbooks elaborate some additional rules for explaining definite article use (e.g., González-Aguilar & Rosso-O'Laughlin, 2006; Zayás-Bazan, Bacon, & García, 2006). Finally, and because the issue of Spanish article use is complex, some advanced grammar textbooks for L2 learners explain their use with as many as 28 different rules (see Butt & Benjamin, 2004). Another advanced Spanish textbook, by King and Suñer (2004), offers an 11-page explanation of definite and indefinite determiners.

In the end, textbook authors are not entirely to blame. It may be argued that our expectations as language teachers and the lack of research in applied linguistics and pedagogical grammars are the two main culprits for maintaining problematic explanations in the majority of language textbooks.

The goal here is not to highlight the inadequacies of a specific textbook, but rather to demonstrate the shortfall of a common explanation found in intermediate and elementary textbooks when they teach articles. The following rules of thumb illustrate a particularly customary (but problematic) explanation present in intermediate textbooks for teaching the use of the definite (*el/la/los/las*) versus the indefinite (*un/una/unos/unas*) article in Spanish. This explanation is adapted from Lequerica de la Vega and Salazar's textbook (2003), but similar explanations of articles can be found in most current intermediate textbooks (see the examples given earlier). Lequerica de la Vega and Salazar provide a total of 13 rules to describe contexts in which the definite article is used. Six of these rules pertain to cases when the definite article is employed; another seven rules are provided for situations when the definite article is not present. In addition, the authors provide three rules for the use of the indefinite article and two more rules for contexts where it should not be used. Due to space limitations, I provide here only the six rules for when to use the Spanish definite article:

1. The Spanish definite article is used:
  - 1a. When the noun refers to something specific. Example: *El abrigo de Luis es de piel.* (The coat of Luis is made of leather.)
  - 1b. When the noun refers to something in its totality, in an abstract sense, and is general and collective. Example: *El pastel de cumpleaños es muy común en mi casa.* (The birthday cake is very common at my house.)
  - 1c. With parts of the body and clothing. Example: *Mi amigo movió la mano.* (My friend moved his hand.)

- 1d. With days of the week, except after the verb *ser*. Example: *Hoy es viernes. Siempre vamos al cine los viernes.* (Today is Friday. We always go to the movies on Fridays.)
- 1e. With *Sr., Sra., Srta. Dr. Dra.,* and other titles, if they are followed by the name of the person to whom one refers. Example: *El Sr. Alcantara es abogado.* (Mr. Alcantara is a lawyer.)
- 1f. With meals of the day and with time. Example: *Tomo café con el desayuno.* (I drink coffee with breakfast.); *El almuerzo es a las tres.* (Lunch is at three.)

This kind of treatment, although commonly encountered, is insufficient. First, the different rules do not have the same status (the first two are general, and the other four are highly contextualized). Second, they portray the use of the definite article as something that depends on the noun, when, in fact, its use depends on the speaker and how he or she wishes to construct the meaning evoked by the utterance. Third, the rules are difficult to recontextualize to other situations. If we attempt to do so, we readily find counterexamples:

- 2a. Specific reference, but using *un*: *Un abrigo suyo es de piel.* (One of his coats is made of leather.)
- 2b. General reference, but using *un*: *Comer un pastel todos los días te hará engordar.* (To eat cake every day will make you gain weight.)
- 2c. Parts of the body, but using *un*: *Mi amigo movió una mano.* (My friend moved one hand.)
- 2d. After *ser*, but using *el*: *Es el lunes que no voy a estar en casa.* (It's Monday that I am not going to be home.)
- 2e. Before a title and name of person, but using *un*: *Un Sr. Alcantara es abogado.* (A Mr. Alcantara is a lawyer.)
- 2f. Meals, but using *un*: *Con un desayuno es suficiente.* (One breakfast is enough.)

The conceptual meaning of the definite article is obscure not only because of the counterexamples, but also because learners will struggle while trying to construct a coherent understanding of the meaning of definite articles from a list of unrelated rules. The only statements about the meaning of definitive articles, rules 1a and 1b, are not explained. Issues regarding the meaning of specificity of the noun, generic reference, or collectivity are not explored. What is the meaning of the terms “definite,” “general,” and “abstract”? This issue is precisely the basis for a conceptual approach to grammatical analysis and presentation. Students need to understand what definiteness, generality, and abstraction mean—yet teachers are not trained to present such concepts in their classes.

Advanced grammar manuals try to avoid these problems by presenting as many as 30 different rules for definite articles in Spanish (e.g., Butt & Benjamin, 2004). These manuals may or may not be intended for classroom use. At any rate, they seem to be students' and teachers' only alternative for a detailed explanation. However, presenting 30 different rules for article use is probably not helpful from a conceptual point of view or even from a general pedagogical point of view.

One solution is to explain language not through rules, but rather through meaning categories—that is, by finding conceptual categories that coherently explain meaning and consequently focus on the use of specific linguistic features. This endeavor is a significant research task for applied linguists. Nonetheless, identifying conceptual categories that allow us to understand the meaning intended by speakers when they use articles in Spanish is a critical first step in a conceptual approach to pedagogical grammar.

To summarize, L2 grammatical explanations in most elementary and intermediate language textbooks are constructed both as a list of how to form various structures and as a list of how to use these structures based on rules of thumb that attempt to explain their meaning and functionality. The challenge arises when explaining meaning—that is, when articulating connections between rules of language use and language meaning. In the articles example, we often find lists of regularities and statements about meaning that lead to inconsistent generalizations, which cannot orient learners with systematicity and consistency. Consequently, learners are forced to construct ad hoc—and sometimes inaccurate and incomplete—understandings of the target forms, their meaning, and their use. Furthermore, through these rules, grammar is constructed as an inert object that determines how language is to be used (e.g., the ill-conceived rule to use the definite article after *ser*). Ideally, the goal should be to promote a fluid understanding of language so that it becomes an instrument for the construction of meaning through agency. In this case, for example, a speaker should learn to use the definite article in a particular context to achieve a specific purpose.

## A Conceptual Explanation of Spanish Articles

From a conceptual perspective, a first critical issue when explaining language is finding a category of meaning that underlies the use of a specific grammatical feature. For instance, aspectual meaning is the semantic basis of the Spanish preterit/imperfect distinction. However, aspectual differences are not the only relevant issue; the concepts of foregrounding and backgrounding are also critical at the discourse level. Thus implementing a conceptual approach, like any pedagogical approach, is not a question of simply finding the perfect explanation. Meaning in discourse is always fluid, so the challenge is finding a category that captures with a certain degree of systematicity the meaning of a grammatical feature. A complete, coherent, and conceptual approach then needs to be implemented at the curriculum level (more on this issue later).

Here I propose a potential definition for teaching Spanish articles based on the work of De Mello (1980; see also Katz & Blyth, 2007, for how to teach the French article system). It is important to highlight once more that the essence of any concept is understanding, and the essence of understanding is meaning. From a teaching perspective, this relationship implies the need to find a teachable explanation that is based on meaning. In the case of articles, referentiality seems to be the critical category underlying the use of definite, indefinite, or zero articles in Spanish. However, to understand referentiality, we also need to appreciate how

we count, quantity, or refer to nouns and to recognize the reality that they represent as concrete and countable entities, as entities that represent a whole class, as just the basic essence/meaning of an entity, or as part of a given entity.

The distinction in meaning is subtle in many contexts. Consider the following examples:

1. *Quiero café* (I want coffee). No article, reflecting simply the essence of the entity: coffee or a partitive reading (some coffee).
2. *Quiero un café* (I want a coffee). Indefinite article, but existence is clear: refers to a (cup of) coffee.
3. *Quiero el café* (I want the coffee). Definite article, more specific to a context: a definite reference to some type of coffee that the speaker anticipates to be known by the listener.

Of course, understanding the conceptual category is just a first step; the key here is understanding the system as a whole. As Whitley mentions, following Bull (1965), “[T]he problem becomes more confused than it really is only when students are led to adjust Spanish grammar to English through the addition of ad hoc amendment rules to English” (2002, p. 158). The issue is then helping learners understand how the system of referentiality functions in Spanish: from individuals to totality/class; from essence to partitive; and from specific to generic. Spanish articles have several functions, including marking specific reference to nouns (i.e., marking their existence), referring to their general meaning, marking their basic prototypical meaning, or marking their essence.

Figures 2 and 3 compel students to begin thinking about the Spanish article system and the meanings that may be constructed through the use of articles.

### Figure 2

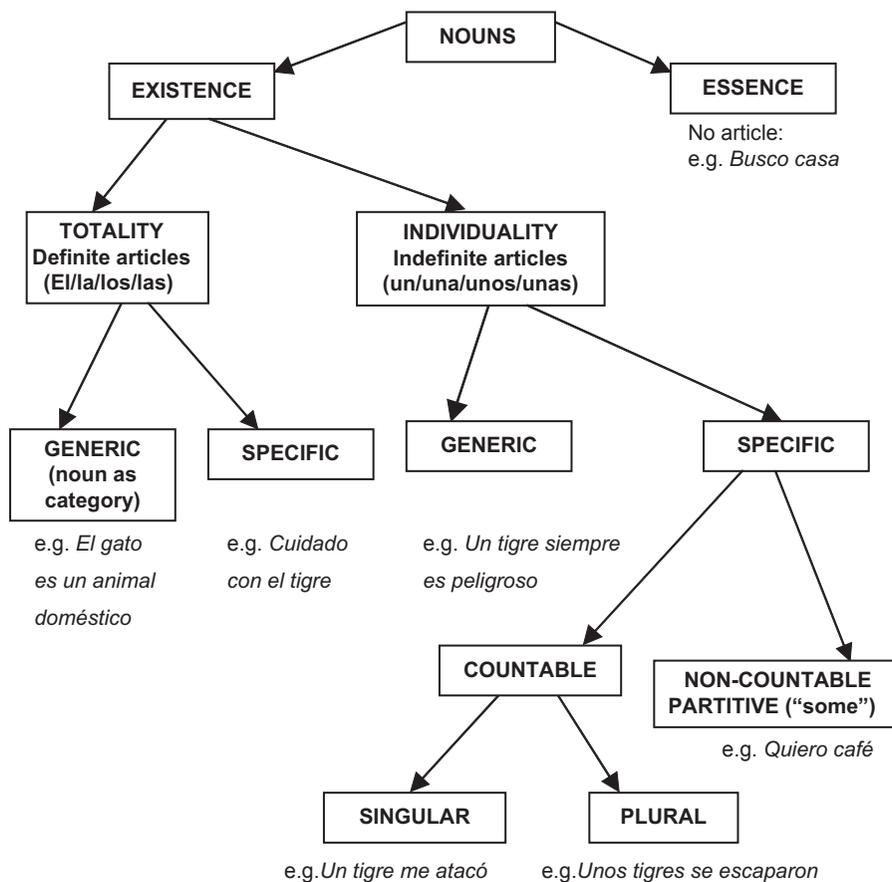
Verbalization for articles: basic concepts

1. Articles are used by speakers to specify the meaning of a noun:
  - 1a. Noun quality: based on the very meaning of the noun as something quantifiable or not (count versus mass nouns)
  - 1b. Article reference: based on how one presents the referent as generic or specific (definite and indefinite)
2. When noun quality and article reference are combined, the speaker can emphasize an entity (a noun) as belonging to a generic or specific class (totality); as having generic or specific individuality; or as highlighting the essence or part of the essence of an entity.

Refer to Figure 3, which is based on the work of Spanish linguist De Mello (1980), to explain when you will use no article, indefinite articles, or definite articles when referring to specific nouns. How is the meaning of the noun constructed?

**Figure 3**

The system of Spanish articles based on the work of De Mello (1980)



The key is to understand that Spanish speakers choose to construct a specific meaning by selecting a particular article. For students, the goal is to develop a conceptualization about how Spanish organizes reality through its article system. Figures 2 and 3 are intended as a learning tool to promote the development of a conceptual understanding of articles, not as a definitive explanation of article use in Spanish.

Figure 2 is an example of a basic introduction to be used in a verbalization activity. Within a conceptual approach, teachers and students have to become philosophers of language in the finest and most genuine sense of the word. This mindset might go against the pragmatic zeitgeist of current pedagogy. However, the intent of this type of thinking activity is not simply to understand language and explain it with empty and sophisticated verbalism, but rather to understand language with the intent of mastering complex new meanings through constructing new conceptualizations.

Some might argue that Figure 3 is too complicated for the average university undergraduate. Of course, the very same undergraduate may study organic

chemistry, neuroscience, or inferential statistics, or s/he may read Foucault in an English literature class. Clearly, understanding the meaning of referentiality is certainly not out of reach for such a student. It is certainly challenging as a conceptual notion, however, so some students may struggle to master it.

The notion of a struggle in learning also runs counter to the pedagogical spirit of our times, where students are always supposed to feel motivated and relaxed in the classroom environment. However, true conceptual development requires students to question their existing understandings, so that they can build new conceptual orientations. Constructing new understandings and challenging old conceptualizations are not easy; indeed, such work may lead to struggles and even crises. Nevertheless, these are productive crises if they promote the development of new understandings. After all, changing or at very least challenging one's worldview—in this case, one's view about grammar—is (or at least should be) one of the goals of higher education.

As mentioned earlier, conceptual instruction may lead to a learning crisis for students. It is not easy to construct new conceptualizations. This statement is not meant to suggest that developing new concepts is necessarily painful, but this effort is certainly challenging. From a Vygotskian perspective, crises are positive moments where we discover a tension between what we want to know and what we do not know. Unfortunately, teachers are often guilty of infantilizing language teaching, so we tend to avoid anything that might appear too complex in the language classroom. As Bull (1965) argues, by trying to avoid presenting complexity in this way, we end up introducing simplified rules that do not hold. In the end, issues become even more complex due to the well-intentioned omissions. This practice is, for example, reflected in some new elementary textbooks that do not explain the semantic and pragmatic properties of the Spanish article system at all.

As mentioned earlier, a pedagogical gap in our approaches to L2 grammar pedagogy arises when teaching attempts to address meaning only through inadequate rules of thumb. This is certainly not a new claim. Rules of thumb are neither general nor abstract enough to provide a complete orientation to grammar internalization. In addition, they do not have the psychological status to be easily transformed into grammatical meaning that learners can use to make sense of language. Thus the central issue is how we can create pedagogical conditions in the L2 classroom to transform sophisticated, coherent, meaning-based explanations of language into concepts with psychological functionality. That is, how may concepts be used as tools of the mind to orient learners' oral and written communicative production?

## **Understanding the Internalization of Categories of Meaning: From Thinking about Language to Thinking through Language**

The challenge for teachers and learners is to transform grammatical conceptualizations—systematic and coherent grammatical explanations based on concepts—into functional concepts that can be used as tools of the mind when communicating in a second language. Researchers and teachers need more than

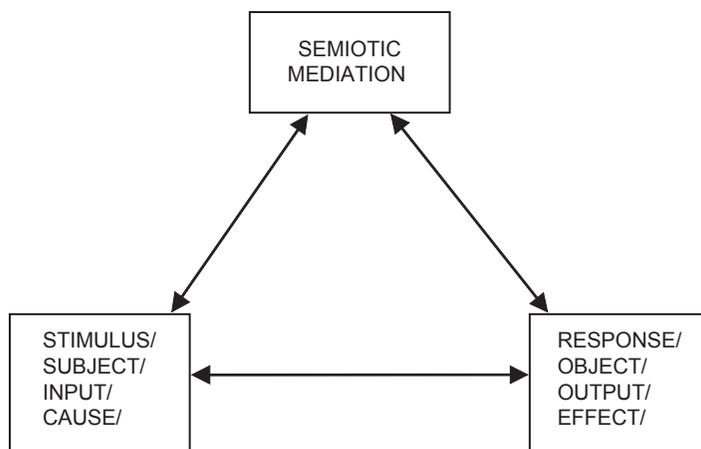
esoteric explanations to understand how concepts become procedurally relevant for L2 learners (Karpov, 2003; Kozulin, 2003). Research emerging from the sociocultural theory of mind (SCT) in the field of SLA sheds light on the use of tools of the mind in the process of L2 development (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, for a review of the research).

The critical link involves understanding how L2 learners start thinking *through* concepts instead of simply thinking *about* concepts when communicating in a second language. The defining moment that transforms an inert conceptualization into a functional concept occurs when the student uses the concept as tool for understanding (see Vygotsky, 1986). To grasp the significance of this principle, we need to understand Vygotsky's notion of internalization through mediation as the essence of human consciousness (Figure 4).

According to Vygotsky, higher forms of human consciousness (voluntary attention, intentional memory, intentional planning, abstract thinking) emerge in mediated activity—that is, goal-directed actions that are realized through the use of auxiliary means. These auxiliary means may include both material tools (such as a hammer or a computer) and ideal ones (maps, graphs, formulas, but mainly language, as the most effective symbolic tool). Through this kind of mediated communication, unique forms of human thinking emerge and develop. Verbal thinking, although not the only type of mediated thinking, is, in most situations, the most common and powerful one. Ontogenetically, the development of verbal thinking is fostered through the internalization of conceptual categories (Vygotsky, 1986).

The internalization of conceptual categories does not take place instantaneously, however. A critical distinction in sociocultural psychology when explaining conceptual development is differentiating between everyday or spontaneous

**Figure 4**  
Semiotic mediation of higher forms of human consciousness



Source: Adapted from Vygotsky (1978).

concepts (i.e., conceptions of the world that emerge in our everyday functioning) and theoretical or scientific concepts (i.e., conceptions that emerge systematically in formal instructed settings). The key for continued conceptual development is the convergence of the two types of conceptualizations. To use a spatial metaphor, spontaneous concepts need to emerge from everyday sense-making activities and become more abstract so that they may combine with theoretical concepts, which need to descend from the realm of theoretical definition-articulation (i.e., top-down) activity. Abstract specification and contextual concretization are the true tests of a functional concept in the Vygotskian sense (Vygotsky, 1986).

In this respect, internalization is the process of transforming a concept “in itself” (i.e., a definition of a concept) into a concept “for the self” (i.e., a functional tool for understanding and orientation) through the help of others (teachers, peers, books), that is, a concept for the “other.” From the present perspective, this transformation is produced through semantic reflection. In this sense, if development is promoted through conceptual thinking, and if conceptual thinking emerges when the learner uses a concept as a mediating sign, then promoting conceptual development is based on creating activities that foster the use of these developing understandings as tools for thinking.

In this chapter, the point is to apply Vygotsky’s notion of conceptual mediation to the teaching of L2 advanced grammar concepts. The key to internalizing concepts is the pedagogical operationalization of the notion of mediation—that is, the promotion of internationalization through mediation (more on this later).

## **Promoting the Internalization of Categories of Meaning: Concepts Becoming Tools of the Mind in the L2 Classroom**

This section outlines the pedagogical principles to transform grammatical conceptualizations (sophisticated grammatical explanations based on concepts) into functional concepts that can be used as tools of the mind when communicating in a second language. Designing activities where students are required to think through the concept applied to concrete reflection activities is a critical step of a conceptual approach.

In Negueruela (2003), I adopted and adapted Gal’perin’s and others’ work (Gal’perin, 1992; Arievidtch & Stetsenko, 2000; Haenen, 1996, 2001) on systemic-theoretical instruction as the basis for proposing four basic pedagogical principles for promoting conceptual development when teaching L2 grammar:

1. **Conceptualization**—finding a minimal unit of instruction. Explanations of language need to be semantically abstract, general, and systematic.
2. **Materialization**—providing graphic representations of concepts to students. Rules of thumb are not adequate psychological tools, but even a semantic conceptualization is not enough. Pedagogical materials in the form of material aids, graphs, schemas, outlines, and so on need to be designed so learners can use them to help them think about language through concepts.

3. Verbalization—talking through concepts. Language can be used as a tool for understanding. Tasks are designed where learners have to use the concepts materialized through different learning aids to explain their use of a specific grammatical feature. These tasks may be done through oral recordings, journal entries, peer interactions, and so on.
4. Articulation—creating webs of meanings. Different types of conceptualizations should be connected. Vygotsky explains that for a concept to be genuine, it is by definition part of a network. The use of any grammatical meaning is not isolated, so a curricular articulation based on concepts should be developed to address the issue of conceptual development in second language learners. For instance, article use depends on understanding nouns as count or mass.

A conceptual approach should be implemented while recognizing that teaching grammar conceptually should not monopolize classroom time. After all, valuable classroom time should be devoted to the teaching of written and oral communication. Nevertheless, reflection on grammatical meaning is critical for developing awareness and control over grammatical features. This is, indeed, the notion of internalization through mediation represented in Figure 4.

The concretization of these principles remains a work in progress. Research on pedagogical grammars is especially relevant for the principle of conceptualization, and work within the field of cognitive linguistics where form is explained through categories of meanings should also be compatible with this line of inquiry. It is critical to develop resources related to the principle of materialization as well. A variety of graphs, schemas, and outlines, if properly designed, may be adequate learning aids. The key is that these learning tools need to help learners “think through meaning” (Figure 4 is an example). Consequently, these devices must become more than learning aids. For Gal’perin, these materializations can achieve psychological status if learners internalize them and visualize the target concepts in concrete terms. As any experienced teacher knows, learners cannot rely on a lengthy theoretical explanation as a tool for understanding.

Once we find coherent, complete, and teachable conceptualizations to explain a specific grammatical point, they should be introduced in the classroom so that L2 learners can use these explanations as tools to reflect on language as a communicative activity. Of course, the means used to achieve this goal constitutes a methodological issue. Verbalization tasks (i.e., reflection activities using theoretical concepts) are one option to explore (see the example in Figure 5). These activities may be assigned as homework or as in-class activities, and students should receive a variety of handouts, schemas, outlines, graphs, and explanations to help them materialize these abstract concepts. Furthermore, the classroom dynamic should be designed to foster reflection *through* grammatical concepts (and not just reflection *about* or *on* concepts). This is, indeed, the critical issue: The goal is not for students simply to think about conceptual meanings (create definitions), but for them to think through those meanings (develop conceptual categories with functional capabilities).

Figure 5 shows an example of the implementation of this principle through a very basic task where learners are asked to reflect on their linguistic choices by

**Figure 5**

Verbalization task: learning abstract grammatical notions in Spanish

**Step 1: Writing Task**

Write an email to one of your Spanish friends where you describe and explain to him or her your idea of the perfect spring break.

**Step 2: Verbalization**

Make a recording where you explain why you have used each article. Use *semantic and abstract* reasons based on meaning—that is, based on what you wish to express. Use the chart provided (see Figure 3). Do not use mechanical rules such as “With parts of the body, I use a definite article.”

Source: Adapted from Negueruela (2003).

providing semantic reasons for their decisions. This task is only one possibility, of course. Different types of classroom reflective tasks, use of online collaboration tools, homework activities, or other kinds of exercises may all prove to be adequate methodological options.

## Implications for Language Program Directors

The teaching of grammar based on conceptual categories of meanings encompasses the premise that L2 development is a conceptual process. Based on such an understanding, a *teachable grammar*—that is, a grammar that should be taught in complete and effective ways in L2 courses—may be defined as a grammar of categories of meaning (not a grammar of rules of thumb).

Language-awareness activities should focus on teaching grammar based on meaningful categories that not only explain language, but also empower learners to deploy their own meanings through the language. In other words, these activities should enable learners to function as agents who are in control of the communicative tool rather than being controlled by it. This approach represents a departure from most current orientations to grammar teaching in the L2 classroom, wherein teaching grammar is connected to a variety of strategies to teach morphology and syntax: the traditional presenting or practicing of language features; practicing grammar through contextualized activities; promoting the noticing of linguistic forms through a variety of strategies; or even providing a traditional grammar presentation by means of overt teaching of rules of thumb and practicing forms so as to provide noticing and mastery of grammatical features.

In most current L2 classrooms, grammatical presentations may be either deductive (i.e., reviewing the paradigms and the grammar rules presented in the textbook) or inductive (i.e., exposing students to multiple examples of a specific grammatical feature so that they create their own generalizations). From a conceptual perspective, both of these options lack a focus on the quality of the explanation. A systematic,

coherent, yet teachable explanation of language is meaning based. Even more important, the explanation must be amenable to use as a tool for thinking and not just a rule to be memorized, applied, or inferred (see Lantolf, 2007, on the differences between concept-based teaching and explicit and implicit instruction).

The internalization of grammatical knowledge, even a grammar of meanings, is not the goal of L2 teaching. Instead, teaching language should focus on written and oral communication. The communicative language teaching (CLT) movement has been instrumental in emphasizing the importance of prioritizing communication in the L2 classroom. It also emphasizes that presenting and practicing grammar needs to occur through contextualized activities that contain functional objectives. Avoiding sentence-level grammar explanations and nonfunctional grammar presentations is certainly critical to escape mechanical language practice. Various L2 teaching methodologies have articulated proposals that posit grammar as just one of the components in the teaching of written and oral communication. More recently, literacy-based approaches to L2 teaching are helping us understand texts as situated genres that are critical in making cultural objectives concrete and in transcending the teaching of communication as merely the teaching of interpersonal communication. Indeed, literacy-based approaches remind us about the situated and cultural nature of texts and the centrality of writing as a developmental activity (see Kern, 2000).

A genuine articulation of a conceptual pedagogy needs to consider the implementation of a concept-based teaching approach not only at the classroom level, but also at the curricular level from elementary-level L2 courses, because learners begin constructing conceptualizations about language from the very first day of class.<sup>2</sup> Once rule-of-thumb approaches to the teaching and learning of L2 grammar make their mark, they are difficult to overcome. In addition, even though they may be taking elementary-level courses, adult learners have the capacity to understand complex and abstract concepts intellectually. The challenge, then, is to help them proceduralize and automatize these concepts through appropriate pedagogical practice that is both engaging and meaningful. In the end, this endeavor is a methodological and pedagogical task with important administrative implications.

It is important to reiterate that a conceptual approach to language teaching does not argue for a change of focus in classroom L2 teaching. Indeed, the focus of the classroom remains on the teaching of written and oral communication through a variety of well-designed activities (DiPietro, 1987). When implemented correctly, a conceptual approach to the teaching of L2 grammars should complement such a pedagogical approach.

LPDs and instructors interested in implementing a conceptual approach to language teaching should consider how such a change could be integrated into their specific institutional contexts. Much of the pedagogical and methodological work needed to apply a conceptual approach to the L2 classroom remains to be done, and LPDs should play a critical role in its incorporation in real-world classrooms. However, programmatic changes cannot be accomplished effectively by any one individual; a teaching community needs to be invested in and in favor of articulating new pedagogical practices. In short, the implementation of conceptual activities is not a task for just LPDs to assume alone, but a task for the whole teaching community to undertake together.

LPDs should consider the four basic pedagogical principles outlined earlier in this chapter when they are training TAs to teach while using a conceptual approach for teaching grammar. Four initial steps should be taken. First, instructors need to understand and be able to define the term “grammar.” Second, instructors need to become aware of the inconsistent and incomplete quality of grammar explanations presented to L2 learners through rules of thumb in most elementary- and intermediate-level textbooks. Third, a familiarity with work being done in the realm of language-specific pedagogical grammar is imperative. Finally, depending on the institutional constraints and workload of instructors, teachers and language program directors should work together to produce their own pedagogical materials that supplement the pedagogical materials already in use.

LPDs should take the lead in analyzing the explanations present in the L2 textbook explanations used in their specific language program. These grammatical explanations should be evaluated by considering their consistency, systematicity, and completeness and, if necessary, be reformulated.

Yet creating better explanations is not enough. Materials development must be undertaken to create activities and classroom dynamics that are adequate for promoting reflection through “meaning on meaning” (and not just about meaning—see Figure 4). Developing tasks that integrate reflection through concepts is also important (see Figure 5). Language program directors might also organize material development teams formed by experienced TAs and instructors with the goal of developing a variety of reflective tasks that emerge from the principles outlined in this chapter.

Applied linguistic scholarship should focus on actual L2 classroom teaching and learning practices based on the sociocultural theory of mind, such that teaching communities conduct research on the concrete outcomes of using a conceptual approach to promote L2 development. Current work in the field provides evidence that should inspire the continuation of this promising line of research. The road to a meaningful approach to language teaching lies ahead of us.

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## Notes

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1. A review of research on contrastive analysis and SLA is beyond the scope of this chapter (see, for instance, Braid, 1999).
2. Instructors at very large university-level L2 programs in the United States may find that it is easier to start integrating conceptual explanations and activities at the intermediate level (third or fourth semester of L2 study), simply because of the large number of sections in elementary levels.

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