

# 4 STUDENTS' GRAMMAR CONCEPTS

Students scarcely use grammar concepts school has provided when carrying out writing tasks in collaboration. This raised questions about how these concepts are and how students have built them. Research in this field is based on the dialogue that occurs in the classroom while solving the tasks within instructional sequences. We also draw on very diverse instruments to generate reflection on the language.

Observing the lack of grammatical argumentation in the resolution of the problems while writing a text (...) was the origin and the triggering to investigate the characteristics of the grammatical knowledge of some students who were taught grammar throughout their schooling, but who clearly did not use this knowledge when using the language.

Camps A., Guasch, O., Milian, M., Ribas, T. (2005). *Bases per a l'ensenyament de la gramàtica* [Fundaments for grammar teaching]. Barcelona: Graó, p. 43.

The grammatical knowledge of the students is not a matter of all or nothing. In "their knowledge", a mixture of diverse sources of knowledge is identified and it leads to very diverse and disconnected knowledge: specific school knowledge, knowledge derived from their own reflection, knowledge developed by them based on inferences, generalizations more or less intuitive or more or less grounded.

Camps, A. (coord.) (2001). *El aula como espacio de investigación y reflexión* [The classroom as a space for research and reflection]. Barcelona: Graó, p. 177.

## CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CONCEPT OF "PRONOUN"

Students are assigned the following task of completing sentences, which aims to indirectly explore the students' declarative knowledge of the pronouns:

- A feature of the pronoun is...
- The difference between a pronoun and an article is...
- We need a pronoun for...

## RESULT OF THE ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENTS' RESPONSES

The responses corresponding to this activity are systematized and categorized with the procedure known as "systemic network". The answers allow us to see clearly that learners resort to the school definition of the pronoun as "a word that replaces the noun", although such a definition is not required.

FUNCTION	EXAMPLES	N	
Locate	the word that goes in front of the noun	5	
Accompany	that accompanies the noun / a noun	2	
Replace	Simple replacing	that replaces the noun	16
		replace nouns such as I, you, he, they abbreviation of we and you	
	Replacing + saving	they save us from including a noun	2
		from repeating: not to include and keep repeating the same word	4
from length: abbreviate sentences and make them shorter	1		
Refer to	we do not need to write the name every time we refer to it	2	
Be like	it is what looks like a noun	2	
Reference to school tasks	make sentences complete phrases or sentences make exams	17	
TOTAL		41	

### Dialogue 1

Researcher: is this a verb, "sargantana" [lizard]?  
 Sílvia: no.  
 Marta: I think it is.  
 Sílvia: no, because you cannot say... I lizard, you lizard, he lizards, we...  
 Researcher: and is it a verb or is it not?  
 Marta: no, it is a word.  
 Sílvia: no, it is a sentence.

p. 206

**Commentary on Dialogue 1:** The couple of 3rd grades (8-9 years old) use a strategy learned at school to identify the verbs. They recognize whether a word is a verb or it is not through a morphological criterion: identifying its conjugation.

### Dialogue 2

Researcher: "I always eat chocolate", when does that happen?  
 Georgina: always.  
 Neus: always.  
 Georgina: past, future and present.  
 Researcher: and, so, does not it happen right now?  
 Georgina: it does, but it also happened before and after.  
 Researcher: and how do you know that this happens before, now and after?  
 Georgina: because the word always indicates the passing of time.

p. 282

**Commentary on Dialogue 2:** This pair also of 3rd graders realizes that the presence of the adverb always gives the verb a meaning of the habitual present.

Dialogues extracted from:  
 Casas, M. (2014). "When does that happen?" *Recognition of the retrospective usage of the present tense among primary school students*. In T. Ribas, X. Fontich, and O. Guasch (eds.), *Grammar at school: Metalinguistic activity in language education* (pp-203-226). Brussels: Peter Lang.

Interviews, as well as being a research tool for students' concepts, become learning instruments from the moment they allow students to talk about their concepts, to think over their ideas about language, or to contrast them with the adult's answers.

Camps A., Guasch, O., Milian, M., Ribas, T. (2005). *Bases per a l'ensenyament de la gramàtica* [Fundaments for grammar teaching]. Barcelona: Graó, p. 50.

Understanding students' grammatical knowledge can influence the teaching of the reflective uses of the language and of grammatical concepts, which deemed necessary for such reflection.

Camps A., Guasch, O., Milian, M., Ribas, T. (2005). *Bases per a l'ensenyament de la gramàtica* [Fundaments for grammar teaching]. Barcelona: Graó, p. 52.

Metalinguistic reflection is the potential source of explicit grammatical learning, in such a way that students are able to use language to manage their task of observation temporarily distanced from the communicative flow and for a more efficient linguistic use.

The analysis of this activity allows us to identify the enormous difficulty that students experience when drawing on their grammatical knowledge. What are the obstacles that learning the grammatical concepts present?

A research protocol is a set-up based on tasks such as definition (declarative knowledge) and identification (procedural knowledge), and semi-structured interviews on various concepts (subject, pronoun, subjunctive, present time, adverb, adjective, etc.).

It is observed that the declarative knowledge of students constitutes an unorganized conglomerate of diverse notions (morphosyntactic, semantic, and pragmatic) and that between this declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge there is a distance (what they know is not transferred into use).

The question for successive searches is as follows: How can we help both students and teachers to make their knowledge about grammar more operational?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY



The grammatical concepts of high school students: The personal pronoun  
 Camps et al



The construction of grammatical knowledge by primary and secondary school students  
 Casas, Durán and Fontich

