GRAMMAR, TEACHING AND (R)EVOLUTIONS

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Resumen: Se ha estudiado ampliamente que los seres humanos pueden usar palabras, signos, símbolos gráficos, gestos, onomatopeyas y ruidos simples para comunicarse y producir significado. Estas formas de comunicación se entienden gracias a un contexto. Sin embargo, vivimos en un mundo de cambios constantes donde los contextos pueden variar no solo en términos geográficos, de círculo social, de lugar o de nivel educativo, sino también en el tiempo. Las palabras que usamos el año pasado podrían tener un significado completamente diferente hoy en día, y las culturas están en constante (r)evolución, por lo que las nuevas ideologías aparecen más rápido de lo que el lenguaje puede adaptarse. En esta realidad cambiante, la enseñanza de un idioma y la comprensión de su sistema y estructura se ha convertido en una tarea más desafiante. Por lo tanto, los profesores, los maestros, los maestros en formación y los estudiantes requieren un enfoque integral para analizar, comprender y explicar dicho sistema y estructura: la gramática funcional sistémica (SFG).

Palabras clave: Gramática , Enseñanza de idiomas, Lingüística, Aprendizaje activo.

Abstract: It has been broadly studied that humans can use words, signs, graphical symbols, gestures, onomatopoeias, and simple noises to communicate and produce meaning. These forms of communication are understood thanks to a context. However, we live in a world of constant changes where contexts can vary not only in terms of geography, social circle, venue, or educational level, but also in time. Words we used last year could have a completely different meaning today, and cultures are in constant (r)evolution so new ideologies appear quicker than language can adapt. In this changing reality, teaching a language and understanding its system and structure has become a more challenging enterprise. Thus, professors, teachers, pre-service teachers and learners require a comprehensive approach to analyze, understand, and explain such system and structure: systemic functional grammar (SFG).

Reasons to adopt SFG in ESL/EFL classes

1. SFG is directed to the study of real-life communication and the everyday use of English in different contexts. SFG provides us a valuable resource to

understand why and how the user of a language, in our case English, chooses to use specific words and creates a specific structure to express his/her intentions and ideas from a contextual perspective. In the words of Banegas (2021), citing Lise Fointaine, "*language is understood as a semiotic and paradigmatic system of choices for meaning making*", so, from this point of view, we consider the user of a language as a thinking being who is able to choose the words and structures suitable to create meaning in a certain context.

In SFG, language is considered beyond that concept defining it as a set of standardized, rigid rules which must be followed to produce a meaningful expression. It explains the nature, meaning and intention of expressions used in multiple contexts. Who of us has never asked, as EFL/ESL learners, about the meaning of expressions like "I dunno", "what's up?" or that of the (not that) new acronyms used on social networks like "ROFL"? And seeing them as part of an interaction, what about the meaning exchanges like

A: What's up?

B: I dunno, she's just ROFL

Of course, one could say this interaction is informal, but then, immediately, one could think the choices could have changed if the situation/context would have been formal

A: What is going on, here?

B: I do not know. She is just laughing out loud and out of control

SFG is providing the tools we need to explain how real language works in real life, in either formal or informal contexts. In the words of Thompson, "*Functional Grammar sets out to investigate what the range of relevant choices are, both in the kinds of meanings that we might want to express (or functions that we might want to perform) and in the kinds of wordings that we can use to express these meanings; and to match these two sets of choices.*" (Thompson, 2014).

2. The SFG approach is not leaving aside the previous knowledge future English teachers have and it is not radically separated from the concepts brought by structural grammar. Banegas (2021), commenting on the increase in the adoption of SFG as a paradigm to teach grammar in Anglophone and Latin American countries points at two facts brought by Liu and Nelson (2016) in their article "Teaching language as a system", where they explain that "*such increasing adherence rests on the affordances that SFG allows by: <u>(1) focusing on meaning and function in language without disregarding form</u>; and (2) strengthening the ties between linguistics and language education.*" It means that form continues to be part of the grammar panorama, but it is no longer seen as a separate feature of language but as part of a system that helps us understand how grammar works. Thompson backs this concept as he states that "*if we start from the premise that language has evolved for the function of communication, this must have a direct and controlling effect on its design features – in other words, the form of language can be substantially explained by examining its functions.*" (Thompson, 2014).

SFG uses the previous knowledge students have based on traditional grammar to help them understand why we use specific form structures to describe our experiences (ideational/experiential metafunction), ask questions or demand something from someone (interpersonal metafunction), organize our ideas to show what is more important to us (textual metafunction), even to know why

we follow a conversation in certain way and why it is so comical when an answer is given out of context (logical metafunction).

3. SFG connects linguistics and language teaching. There seems to be a lack of connection between linguistics and language teaching, not to mention the reluctancy created in the public by marketing and social media influencers against grammar as in the case of Kale Anders burning a grammar book on a YouTube video to promote his English institute in Colombia. Quoting again Liu and Nelson in Banegas (2021) about how SFG is becoming more accepted than other approaches in teaching English: *"such increasing adherence rests on the affordances that SFG allows by: (1) focusing on meaning and function in language without disregarding form; and (2) strengthening the ties between linguistics and language education."* In our context, it is obvious that English teachers should have a good command of the language, however, the moment comes when every classroom professional is challenged by expressions he/she knows how to use and what they mean but can scarcely explain in terms of organization or role in a sentence, or the reason why such expression changes in meaning while used in a different context (translation teachers would clearly understand the tragedy of the jargon). Macken-Horarik et al. (2015), quote Christie addressing this issue: *"it is clear that teachers need to move well beyond identification of 'parts of speech' to include "principled ways in which language structures and orders information, creating clauses and texts (Christie, 2005, p. 234)."* They point to the fact that the teacher's role is limited by the lack of grammar insights in his/her class sessions: *"Without a wide grammatical purview, teachers' attention is limited to correction of syntactic arrangements without regard to their role in 'discourse semantics' (Martin, 1992)."* (Macken-Horarik, Sandiford, Love, & Unsworth, 2015). SFG appears here to offer such widened scope, integrating grammar studies into the teaching-learning process: *"In reviewing current models of linguistics for education, Hancock argues that systemic functional theory holds promise because it "heals the split between grammar and meaning" (Hancock, 2009, p. 201)."* (2015).

As we said before, the incorporation of SFG in English classes, and of course, grammar classes (grammatics) provide a scope that goes well beyond structural grammar without discarding it but making the best of it. It fosters processes of analysis, critical thinking and many other 21st century skills in students and strengthens evaluation processes in teachers. I coincide with the words of Macken-Horarik et al. (2015), this time talking about writing skills *"our position is that a grammatics oriented to contexts of use, meaning-making and to higher levels of organization in language offers teachers and students more to work with in English. Furthermore, if a systemic functional grammatics yields insights into workings of narrative, this should be evident in teachers' accounts of what they taught and in their assessments of students' writing."*

4. Teaching experience. A final argument in favor of the use of SFG in classes comes from my own professional experience using this approach to teach subjects like Grammar I, Grammar II, Oral Communication, and Written Communication, during my time of service as a professor at Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

I have found SFG to be a relevant tool to foster the learning processes of my students. They take these subjects during the fourth and fifth semesters of the English Philology major, a moment when they reach a plateau in the acquisition

of their professional skills. Most of students already understand movies, songs (even rap and hip-hop songs!), they know how to write emails, short stories, and essays, they work for language institutes, teach classes on a freelance basis, or work for call centers, so they feel they already master the language and there is nothing else to be learnt or developed, and it is not easy to take them out of that plateau and help them go through to reach the next level in their learning process. SFG appears then to invite them to assess themselves and find areas to be improved in a language they think they already command. SFG offers them explanations to previously unsolved issues, helps those behind in terms of English level to improve it. SFG is one of the tools that, under a proper pedagogical and didactical approach, can generate a competitive advantage in the skills of our future professionals. Students have reported in their end-of-term evaluations how SFG has improved their English command and communicational skills.

Further findings in Banegas' study support the experiences mentioned as a result of my teaching approach. Banegas (2021) mentions the work of Dewerianka and Jones (2010) encouraging *"the inclusion of SFG in teacher education as it takes teachers "beyond the study of structure to real-world applications in supporting students' language and literacy development" (p. 13)."* Dewerianka and Jones found that *"SFG content, was viewed by the student-teachers as a source of motivation... because it contributes to language teachers' professional development in the area of linguistic knowledge"*, besides *"topics such as discourse markers, cohesion, or thematic progression were perceived as meaningful in their development as future teachers." (Banegas, 2021)*

Now that we know that SFG is the grammar we need to teach, how should it be taught?

Grammar has traditionally been taught from a teacher-centered perspective. Instructors introduce a grammar topic to a group of students commonly in the form of a lecture. Students then take notes and practice what they learnt during the class as a final exercise for the session or in the form of homework.

As Silviany (2021) explains, *"teachers become the most dominant source of information, in teacher-centered learning, for example, all questions which are raised by students, if any, are answered directly by teachers without students' involvement. In designing the class activities, teachers control every single learning experience."*

To incorporate SFG in the ESL/EFL teaching-learning process, it is desirable to have an approach that allows the students to be more active and to participate directly in the construction of knowledge. This objective can be fulfilled thanks to Problem-based learning (PBL). This is a student-centered approach in which students learn about a subject by working in groups to solve an open-ended problem. This problem is what drives motivation and learning in the classroom (Cornell University, n.a).# It offers a student-centered alternative which aims to the development of the 21st century skills (problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and innovation, autonomous learning, etc) (World Economic Forum, 2016), necessary for students to perform beyond expectations in their future (and current) professional lives, and to make the grammar learning process more effective.

With the PBL approach in action, the class is given a problem as a starting point where previous knowledge can be used and take students to a new level of command thanks to the mentoring of a teacher who guides the generation of strategies to tackle such problem, as Vygotsky (1935) explains in his "Umstvennoe razvitie v protsesse obucheniya". The groups follow a structured process to identify what they already know, what they need to know, and how and where to access new information that may lead to the resolution of the problem (Cornell University, n.a).

To exemplify the application of PBL to SFG classes, students can be given a problem that could initially be considered as a subject of basic analysis:

Let's go to the party at my bae's

And then the instructor can ignite a debate about such utterance through guided questions prepared beforehand:

- What is the function (intention) of this clause?

- Is this an imperative/command? If so, most of commands have "you" as a subject, does it happen in this case?

- If imperatives are not commonly mentioning the subject (doer of the action), why, in this case, we are using the pronoun "us" (let us go)?

- Is "us" an actual subject? Doesn't it appear as an object pronoun in your dictionaries?

- What about the verb "let"? Is this an actual action verb? Is it a synomym for the verb "allow"?

- If "let" doesn't mean "allow", what does it mean?

- If it doesn't come with a full meaning, why do we need it?

- What's the role of "bae" in this clause? What does it mean?

And a plethora of questions can be asked to the class just based on this sentence retrieving the knowledge students have been acquiring during their previous classes (not only Grammar classes) and inviting them to work in groups to find the solution to theses "mysteries" in a motivated fashion.

To sum up

SFG is the grammar approach that fits best the current learning needs of ESL/ EFL students, philology students, and even teachers in a professional world where traditional grammar is not offering all the answers learners ask about the (r)evolution of English as a living language, and it is not providing the sufficient tools to effectively teach the language to EFL/ESL learners. SFG allows students and teachers to tackle the new nuances emerging from new structures and word usages English is developing today. SFG also constructs a bridge between linguistics and learning, helping those involved in the teaching-learning process to integrate grammar to their language knowledge as they make the best of their previously acquired skills. Finally, the incorporation of PBL into the SFG teaching strategies offers teachers an active learning approach where students can participate in the improvement of their own command of the language and in the acquisition of skills that will result valuable in overcoming the academic and professional challenges the 21st century presents to all of us.

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