

Introduction

The last twenty years have seen a prolific rise in research and publications in the intersection of cognitive linguistics (CL) and L2¹ pedagogy, now known as applied cognitive linguistics (ACL), and the conversation so far has been enriching and productive. Although the end of the 1990s saw some promising publications in the field (Boers & Demecheleer 1998; Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska 1997; Kövecses & Szabó 1996, to name a few), it was with the publication of the two volumes by Pütz, Niemeier, and Dirven (2001a; 2001b) that the field of ACL emerged as a discipline for the study of acquisition processes and approaches to L2 pedagogy, considering them complementary and not antagonistic, and thus rejecting the (still relevant today) learning versus acquisition dichotomy proposed by Krashen (1985).

Achard and Niemeier (2004) followed up shortly after with another edited volume on the topic and Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) focused on ACL and vocabulary. After Robinson and Ellis (2008) edited the *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*, offering valuable insight into the theoretical foundations and potential of ACL, De Knop, Boers, and De Rycker (2010) went further in a much-needed specific direction: L2 language teaching and ACL, arguing that instruction that draws inspiration from this intersection “can help improve efficient use of those interventions through their capacity to forge robust form-meaning mappings in memory” (p. 15). Their volume included studies with results that signaled advisable directions in which to teach vocabulary, grammatical items, constructions, and even pronunciation. All contributions strongly recommended teacher interventions and explanations, and advocated for the great potential of ACL-trained instructors (and not just as researchers collecting data). The same year, Littlemore and Juchem-Grundmann (2010) published a Special Issue that further reinforced the call for more ACL applications in language teaching, and that also included studies with successful data from classroom instruction (Llopis-García 2010 for Spanish/L2 and Tyler, Mueller, & Ho 2010 for English/L2).

For the case of English as a foreign language (EFL), Tyler (2012) laid out the theoretical groundwork of ACL in its intersection with EFL learning and offered promising results from classroom-based studies on prepositions, modal verbs, and constructions. Bielak and Pawlak (2013) did the same and focused on tense and aspect. To date, these volumes, especially the first one, might be the most comprehensive and accessible

¹ For the sake of coherence, the term L2 will refer to second and foreign language learning, as well as to the more recent “world/global language” designation, which seeks to dispense with potentially negative connotations associated with the “foreign” label.

guides for English-speaking instructors seeking professional development and an academic approach to ACL.

For the pedagogy of languages other than English, the Special Issue on *Applied Cognitive Linguistics to L2 Acquisition and Learning* (Llopis-García & Hijazo-Gascón 2019) also included empirical classroom data (Colasacco 2019), along with other studies seeking to offer pedagogical considerations and renewing the call for ACL teaching materials. The same year also brought the eagerly-awaited edited volume on *Cognitive Linguistics and Spanish L2/FL* (Ibarretxe-Antuñano, Cadierno, & Castañeda Castro 2019), featuring empirical and theoretical approaches to Spanish grammatical features (such as articles, the verbal system, mood selection, comparative constructions, prepositions, and metaphors), all revisited from a CL lens.

All works cited in this literature review present a wide-ranging panorama of the field, and even include studies that have been successful at operating with CL-based principles in the actual language classroom. But questions remain:

- (1) Why are there not *more* classroom-based studies that provide solid evidence that ACL instruction for grammar and lexis is superior to current methodologies that draw on notional-functional approaches? How is it possible that with so many encouraging works aimed at proving the successful allyship of ACL and L2 teaching, after twenty plus years there is still no consistent and definite evidence that *it really works in the classroom*? Sections 4 and 5 address this issue and introduce studies and works that deal with research in the L2 classroom.
- (2) Why are there not *more* examples of ACL teaching materials? How can instructors create their own materials or publishers bring ACL ideas into textbooks if there are no concrete examples or explanations on how to design and develop content? Section 4 is entirely devoted to teaching materials, including published works that offer pedagogical proposals.
- (3) Who is learning about CL outside of the realm of linguistics and how, if at all, are L2 instructors accessing the ideas and potential of ACL for their language classrooms? There seems to be an undeniable gap between academic scholarship and L2 language instruction (which includes instructors, textbook publishers, and material designers), two fields often intertwined, as the literature above aptly shows, but hardly ever truly merged for lasting impact in the language classroom.

This Element seeks to answer these questions from an applied and pedagogical perspective. The aim is to show that *there is already* ample work being done in the ACL-based L2 classroom and that the prospects are encouraging. But also, that there is room *and need* for more: more collaborations between

instructors and researchers; more professional development for instructors on ACL and for researchers on pedagogy; and more examples of teaching materials and classroom content that can serve as stepping stones for others to design their own. The perspective offered in this Element seeks to truly integrate both fields through *the experience of the ACL classroom itself*.²

To this end, Section 1 will explain how the grammar-lexis continuum is addressed in current market-ready textbooks and will offer a general overview of the issues that separate language teaching from linguistics. Sections 2, 3, and 4 will endeavor to show not only that ACL has great classroom potential but, rather, that the principles that inform ACL *are present* in the lessons that are *already being taught* by language instructors themselves. To that end, Section 2 presents the main concepts from ACL and how they relate to teaching. Section 3 addresses ACL instruction with the solid allyship of contributions from second language acquisition (SLA) (focus on form for grammar and lexical approaches for vocabulary). Section 4 dives deeper into pedagogical design, especially from the lens of the contributions that educational technology can offer ACL content design (and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many L2 instructors to teach and find resources online). Section 5 will depart from teaching and focus on the empirical challenges of proving the efficacy of ACL in the L2 classroom. This section will also address the reasons why I think that research has not been able to deliver the expected results and will present an empirical study that does, thereby offering new avenues for research and testing. Section 6 gathers the main ideas from this Element and serves as a closing statement.

1 L2 Language Teaching versus the Linguistics of L2

It is a truth universally acknowledged that L2 language teaching, if it aims to be truly enriching for students, must be in need of constant revision and update, and its instructors must be in continuous professional development in order to be able to understand and apply new approaches.

This Jane Austen freestyle seems sensible, but the actual truth is that this is all harder than it seems. On the one hand, it is accurate to say that there is a significant correspondence between research in theoretical fields such as SLA and real-life applications that have made a difference in L2 instruction. On the other hand, a great deal of past and current research never reaches the pedagogical practice of the classroom. This is so because: (a) SLA publications stay within the field and

² The examples provided will largely be from the Spanish/L2 classroom and will endeavor to serve as a template for other languages, thus contributing to advancing the visibility and potential of ACL beyond the English language proposed by Hijazo-Gascón & Llopis-García (2019). Readers of this Element are hereby invited and encouraged to use all materials proposed here for their own teaching practice or research.

do not reach the teaching community or the textbook publishing industry; (b) research and insights into acquisition and learning are slow to find their way to the professional and academic development of instructors; and (c) because research is too theoretical or too challenging to translate into best pedagogical practices that may be of immediate interest to L2 instructors. There is a (d) to this issue, and it is the disconnect that exists between linguists and language instructors, easily verifiable from the fact that there are very few academic spaces that bring the two communities together and that enable or foster their collaborations and interactions. This last point has a very real impact (although it is highly underrated) in the research that linguists conduct in the L2 classroom. Section 5 on cognitive empirical design will speak to this issue in depth.

As Larsen-Freeman exemplifies when reviewing literature on different instructional practices, “SLA researchers often seek to define what is minimally necessary to explain language acquisition. What is minimally needed is not necessarily what is optimal for classroom instruction” (2015: 266). In this breach between research and language teaching, if the experience of a researcher in the language classroom is limited to the temporary presence of an empirical study, language instructors could rightly point out that their understanding of what happens in the classroom is insufficient and incomplete. However, when teachers plan their lessons, the highly theoretical and often hard-to-access literature from linguistics is not first and foremost on their to-do list. These are professionals who teach and grade every day, prepare and impart lessons, find alternative materials (because textbooks are often not helpful enough), give feedback, and deal with service to their schools, departments, or universities. In the experience of teachers, and as Toth and Davin (2016: 151) state: “Every calculation of what to do in the classroom, and when or how, is a function of how much time we have, and it is perhaps because time is so deeply embedded in our experience of learning that L2 theories have not recognized more overtly how essential time management is to pedagogical effectiveness.”

1.1 The Specific Case of Applied Cognitive Linguistics (ACL)

Cognitive linguistics (CL) and all related disciplines view language as a general, integrated part of human cognition that emerges from our physical, sensorimotor and bodily experiences, as well as from our interaction with the world around (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Langacker 1987, 2009, and 2016; Kövecses 2002; Robinson & Ellis 2008; Ibarretxe-Antuñano & Valenzuela 2012, Littlemore & Taylor 2014; Tyler, Huang, & Jan 2018). Other foundational ideas that will be addressed throughout this volume describe language as symbolic, embodied, motivated, and usage-based.

For the case of L2 pedagogy, Langacker himself, back in 2008, recognized that the impact of linguists on real, day-to-day L2 language instruction had a lot to be desired, and added that it had, in fact, “been less than miraculous and sometimes less than helpful” (2008a: 66). This distance between research and pedagogy is widely recognized in the field (Achard 2008; Littlemore 2009; Llopis-García 2011; Tyler 2012; Suñer & Roche 2019; Piquer-Píriz & Alejo-González 2020), and turns the lack of materials that are informed by linguistic theory into “a hunt” that keeps ACL content away from the mainstream L2 classroom (Nacey 2017: 511). Piquer-Píriz (2021) also points out that although ACL-based materials are very attractive “on paper,” there are three main caveats to their design: (a) it takes time to develop them at home and time to implement them in class and, usually, availability of time when there is a curriculum to cover is a scarce commodity; (b) they require training and know-how, especially when quality professional development may be difficult to come by beyond regular work hours; and (c) guidelines and directives to work with these materials are not present in the descriptors of either the Common European Reference Framework (CERF 2001)³ or the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL),⁴ greatly hindering their mainstream availability.

But the potential is unequivocal. And one important aspect of ACL for L2 is the difference between grammar and vocabulary or, rather, the lack thereof. In the words of Langacker on the architecture of cognitive grammar, “lexicon, morphology and syntax form a continuum” (2009: 1). This idea is radically different from more traditional approaches to language and linguistics, such as generative linguistics (as well as general methodological approaches to L2), where all three components are studied and understood as separate entities. Langacker goes on to say that CL “claims that lexicon and grammar are fully describable as assemblies of symbolic structures, where a symbolic structure is simply the pairing between a semantic structure and a phonological structure” (p. 1). These structures, also known as *constructions*, may be formed by one or many words and acquire their status by having both grammatical structure (schematic in nature) and semantic value. The combination of both is what guarantees their (phonological) presence in the linguistic repertoire of a language. As Holme (2010a: 120) states, “teaching language content does not mean emphasizing grammar over lexis or lexis over grammar. Rather it is a case of taking up different positions along the lexico-grammatical continuum.”

Construction grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2003), another discipline within CL, also “considers that all grammatical phenomena can be understood as learned

³ www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages

⁴ www.actfl.org/

pairings of form [and meaning], which applies to all range of linguistic items, from morphemes to idioms” (Hijazo-Gascón & Llopis-García 2019: 5). And since all these items have semantic value, the continuum between grammar and vocabulary is upheld.

For cognitive linguists, then, grammar and lexis are one and the same, and this fundamental consideration has very interesting implications for the teaching and learning of L2s. It can all start with a challenge to the structure of most market-ready textbooks, where the notional-functional division of chapters (see Section 1.2.1) presents the vocabulary, the grammatical structures, and the pragmatic/contextual information as separate segments within each.

1.2 Aspects of Grammar and Vocabulary in Current L2 Methods

Larsen-Freeman (2015) pointed out that “grammar instruction has been relatively unaltered by research findings. It remains traditional for the most part, with grammar teaching centered on accuracy of form and rule learning, and with mechanical exercises seen as the way to bring about the learning of grammar” (p. 263). And she is not the only one. Lee & VanPatten, back in 2003, observed that many of the important issues about teaching grammar communicatively (i.e., teaching language in ways that are engaging and meaningful for use in real-life social interactions beyond the classroom, as opposed to studying the grammatical system from a theoretical perspective) “seem to be ignored” in most textbooks available in the market (2003: 1). And Tyler (2012), when addressing L2 teaching methodologies (mostly for English as L2, but with clear generalization value), remarks that across time, “while the approaches have changed, the view of the nature and structure of language that underpins these approaches has not. What is remarkable is that the pedagogical grammar adopted by all these approaches is strikingly similar and has changed very little over the past 70 years” (p. 7). This is what Llopis-García, Real Espinosa, and Ruiz Campillo (2012: 10) call the “methodological fallacy,” whereby there is a belief that grammar will be successfully taught when integrated in the methodology *du jour* because *this time*, it will provide better understanding and use for the students.

There are directions in the literature on L2 pedagogy and SLA of when to teach grammar, how much to teach, and how to do it. What there is less of, however, is *what kind of grammar should be taught*. As Méndez Santos and Llopis-García (2021: 262. OT⁵) point out, the grammar-translation

⁵ This acronym will refer to my own translation, that is, direct quotes that I have translated from their original language into English.

method⁶ and the structuralist perspective on language are still present in many classrooms and textbooks. This hinges on lack of resources, institutional decisions, and sometimes on tradition and beliefs about what learning a language implies.

These unchanging conditions maintain the status quo because grammar, regardless of any state-of-the-art methodology, largely: (a) follows a notional-functional approach (see Section 1.2.1); (b) is understood as an object of study; and (c) is still the apple of discord in L2 teaching. Let us consider all these aspects individually.

1.2.1 Grammar Follows a Notional-Functional Approach

The introduction of grammar in the classroom is usually dictated by the textbook content, and most textbooks are organized by chapters or units with a topic to cover. Organizing a syllabus or a textbook around “notions” or real-life situations, and then selecting the linguistic structures or “functions” used to communicate them, is what drives the notional-functional approach.

For a B1 level of Spanish, for instance, and following the descriptors of the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (PCIC, Curriculum Plan of the Cervantes Institute 2006),⁷ topics include: *telling personal anecdotes in the past; talking about future plans, hypothesis, and conditions; and expressing opinions, agreement, and disagreement*, etc. Grammatical content, then, follows the demands of the communicative needs of the unit in question and is learned “at a local level,” instead of holistically or with a more global perspective to account for polysemy, multiple usages, or different contextual cues.

Around since the early 1970s, grammatical content in most available textbooks still follows a notional-functional approach, even if the overall methodology is framed as action-oriented, content-based, blended learning, or project-based learning (to name a few currently popular teaching methods that do not extend their innovations to their treatment of grammar). According to this approach, language conveys meaning, but it needs a situational context of use to acquire “communicative value.” By this view, when performing “communicative acts”, there are “functions of language” as communicative categories (*giving advice, addressing a letter; introducing oneself. . .*) that must be paired vis-à-vis linguistic “notions” (*the conditional, greetings and salutations, reflexive verbs . . .*) (Littlewood 2011).

⁶ A teaching methodology popular in the late nineteenth century that studied language via contrastive translation of examples from the L2 to the students’ L1. It also structured language practice with a focus on forms over meaning.

⁷ https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/

This is especially true for the triple breakdown of the Spanish verbal system, where tenses are introduced according to three dimensions. The first one is *linguistic form* (i.e. “the imperfect future tense,” built with the infinitive and the added endings *-é, -ás, -á, -emos, -éis, -án* for all three conjugations); the second one is *meaning* (i.e. “it is a simple tense to talk about actions in the future”); and the third one is *use* (i.e. to name a few: *predictions, projections, promises, resolutions, future actions, to reassure someone about something, to express uncertainty in the present . . .*). When a verbal tense is presented in this manner in textbooks, the uses are not taught together. Instead, they are spread out across chapters and thematic units, dependent on contextual cues and pragmatic scenarios.

Another example of this practice relates to the presentation of the so-called “conditional” tense in Spanish. In elementary levels (such as A2 of the PCIC, although it does not appear explicitly in the descriptors⁸ of the level), the tense is briefly first learned to “express wishes” and is taught mostly as a chunk (*me gustaría* [I would like] + infinitive). As students progress on to the B1 level,⁹ the conditional adds “courtesy and modesty” to its usage range (*¿Podría hablar con usted?* [could I speak with you?]), mostly to give advice (*Yo en tu lugar, iría al médico* [In your place, I would go to the doctor]). It is also studied when addressing indirect speech, that is, to refer to the words of another in the past (*Iré a la fiesta* → *ella dijo que iría a la fiesta* [I will go to the party → she said she would go to the party]). Well into the B2 level,¹⁰ the descriptor is “probability in the past.” This is the first time that students ever learn that the conditional is a past tense: “expressing posteriority to another event in the past (*consecutio temporum*),” “conditional sentences with the imperfect subjunctive” (*Si pudiera, iría a la fiesta* [If I could, I would go to the party]), or to “express hypothetical wishes” (*Me comería una pizza* [I could eat some pizza]). In the C1–C2 levels,¹¹ the tense is taught to “object to or reject something in the past” (*Sería muy listo, pero . . .* [he may be really smart, but . . .]), or to “warn/express fear in the past,” among other highly context-dependent uses.

Such a scattered view of this tense (Llopis-García 2016a),¹² peppered over levels and class sessions, effectively disconnects both instructors and learners

⁸ https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/niveles/02_gramatica_inventario_a1-a2.htm

⁹ https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/niveles/02_gramatica_inventario_b1-b2.htm

¹⁰ https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/niveles/02_gramatica_inventario_b1-b2.htm

¹¹ https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/niveles/02_gramatica_inventario_c1-c2.htm

¹² www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngkUwCpacdw

from a holistic understanding, and forces them to learn on a need-to-know basis across textbook units and competence levels. However, if a grammar approach is meant to truly be useful in the L2 classroom, it will be because it is able to replicate “a model of language manipulation capable of explaining and generating the same effects of communication and meaning that we can observe in real use” (Llopis-García et al. 2012: 20. OT).

1.2.2 Grammar Is Understood as an Object of Study

Despite claims of “communicative purposes,” L2 grammar is still largely studied as a “foreign object,” by itself and without the input of the L1s or other languages that the students may know. Without interlinguistic reflection and *motivation*¹³ as a way to understand its constructional and semantic value, the grammar charts and tables at the end of every unit in the textbook become stand-alone items of study and memorization through practice exercises. As Toth and Davin point out, “metalinguistic information and feedback intended to foster L2 accuracy must be refined and strategically provided as essential supports for meaningful communication, rather than as ends unto themselves” (2016: 152).

Despite ubiquitous talks of “communicative” grammar, what we find in most L2 textbooks is unquestionably “foreign,” full of rules, exceptions, and opaque metalanguage. There is no space for the students’ L1, so interlinguistic reflections and introspectiveness about “why we say what we say” are not a fostered classroom dynamic and do not become part of the students’ learning process. Many language instructors might recognize the moment of “*Okay, time for some grammar now!*” during their lesson and know that this is inevitably accompanied by groans from the students and promises of “more fun” times ahead, like a song or a role-play activity.

Instruction that presents linguistic forms as a result of the (foreign) system, subordinate to rules and exceptions over which the learner has no control and must be learned “as is” stands to bore, demotivate, and disenfranchise learners from their goals of fluency. When treating grammar as an object of study in the classroom, the PPP (presentation-practice-production) method inevitably appears: *Presentation* of new grammar – where the instructor introduces, explains, and exemplifies the target structure, often using a variety of materials tailored to the exact explanation they are giving. *Practice* usually entails controlled-for-form exercises, where learners practice the target form by filling in the blank, answering true/false questions and other worksheet-type materials,

¹³ In a CL sense, “the fact that abstract senses of words are related to their more literal uses is sometimes referred to by cognitive linguists as linguistic motivation” (Littlemore & Juchen-Grundmann 2010:7).

while the instructor monitors all answers and offers corrective feedback. After this stage, students do more mechanical work and complete exercises from their worksheet. Finally, in the *Production* stage, learners are encouraged to use language in a more open, communicative way, with role-playing exercises, collaborative activities, or group discussions. The idea is to simulate ways in which the target form(s) would be used outside of the classroom, in “the real world.” But this poses a problem for learners because every rule that is applied to grammatical forms without taking their meaning(s) into account will lack any operational value beyond the ad hoc examples provided during in-class work (Llopis-García et al. 2012: 47. OT).

If the phrase “*presentation practice production lesson plan*” is entered on a search engine, 46.7 million results appear. In the “featured snippet” box with content that best represents that search, a site by the British Council is highlighted as relevant, so I have included it here as a prototypical example of a “grammar as an object of study” lesson plan, especially because it mentions that the PPP model “works well as it can be used for most isolated grammatical items,” which is precisely the point of contention of this section – there is no such thing as “isolated grammar” and as Toth and Davin (2016: 152) argue, it is “impossible to truly isolate grammatical forms from purposeful use through practice, as though doing so were a dress rehearsal for some more “authentic” language performance later.”

1.2.3 Grammar Is Still the Apple of Discord in L2 Teaching

Grammar, pedagogical grammar, communicative grammar, descriptive grammar, inductive grammar, what kind of grammar, how to teach grammar, how much to teach, when to teach . . . – these concepts and questions continue to be a topic of contention and disagreement among instructors, curricular designers, linguists, and textbook publishers alike.

As mentioned in Section 1.2, over the last forty years, L2 instruction has been informed by fields such as SLA, cognitive science, educational technology, or the psychology of education. Methodological approaches to class dynamics, the development of communicative skills, and the teaching of sociocultural aspects, to name a few, have been explored and reimaged. However, in agreement with Tyler (2012), Kissling et al. (2018) point out that whatever the methodological improvement, the teaching of grammar “appears to assume that once [it] is introduced, the best path to learning is for students to memorize the rules and the many, seemingly arbitrary meanings associated with a single lexical unit” (p. 229).