

Prospective English Language Teachers' Grammatical Awareness Development: A case study

El desarrollo de la conciencia gramatical de los futuros docentes de inglés: Un estudio de caso

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Abstract

This study examines prospective English language teachers' grammatical awareness development in an English teaching undergraduate program at a private university in Colombia. Data were collected through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, as well as participants' academic written production. Results reveal the internal and external factors which affect pre-service teachers' grammatical awareness development in this context and recurrent grammatical errors in their work. This research informs language teacher education and calls for action in order to enable future English teachers to develop grammatical awareness as part of their training in these programs to successfully attain academic writing.

Keywords: *grammar, grammatical awareness, academic writing, prospective teachers, L2 teaching*

Resumen

Este estudio explora el desarrollo de la conciencia gramatical de los futuros licenciados en Inglés de una universidad privada en Colombia. Se obtuvo información a partir de grupos focales, entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas y producción escrita de los participantes. Los resultados revelan los factores internos y externos que afectan el desarrollo de la conciencia gramatical en los futuros docentes de inglés. Esta investigación informa la educación de los docentes de inglés y llama a la acción en orden para habilitar a los futuros docentes de inglés a desarrollar la conciencia gramatical como parte de su formación en estos programas para poder alcanzar exitosamente la escritura académica.

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conciencia gramatical de los futuros docentes en este contexto, así como los errores gramaticales recurrentes en textos académicos de su autoría. Esta investigación destaca la importancia de establecer estrategias útiles para el desarrollo de la conciencia gramatical en los futuros docentes, como parte de la formación que reciben en los programas, para asumir con éxito la escritura de textos académicos.

Palabras clave: *gramática, conciencia gramatical, escritura académica, formación docente, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras*

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There is wide agreement that giving special attention to academic writing skills, as part of future language teachers' training, is fundamental in a context where educators are expected to perform beyond teaching-learning scenarios to be actively involved in scientific production. Actually, pre-service teachers are often demanded by their educators to produce a substantial volume of academic texts in diverse courses. Nonetheless, with the advent of communicative approaches for language teaching and learning, a debate on the suitability of explicit grammar teaching to develop such skills has been raised. Regarding the way prospective teachers are being taught the language, Howatt (as cited in Andrews, 1999b) states that there is a "switch of attention from teaching the language system to teaching the language as communication" (p. 161). In this attempt, many language teachers tend to disregard grammar, forgetting that it contributes to meaning making (Shen, 2012).

Having a good command of English grammar would help prospective teachers to write effectively by constructing clear, interesting and precise sentences and paragraphs (ibid). Andrews (1994) claims that, besides possessing knowledge on the language system, teachers should develop awareness that involves abilities, sensitivity, understanding, and consciousness regarding how they use this knowledge. Therefore, the extent to which prospective language teachers develop grammatical awareness affects their efficiency in the production of academic texts.

Even if future teachers succeed in fully completing their writing tasks, this may not necessarily result in fluent academic performance. For instance, numerous demonstrations of incorrect use of English grammar have been found in academic texts produced by prospective language teachers who are enrolled in advanced courses in an English teaching undergraduate program at a private university in Colombia. Consequently, this phenomenon led the authors of this study to explore pre-service teachers' grammatical awareness development as part of their training in the program.

Literature Review

Crystal (2016) asserts that grammar is “the study of how sentences mean, and how the bits of sentences mean” (p. 29). According to the author, grammar acts as the structural basis that one has for understanding meaning, expressing it and responding to it within sentences. This knowledge allows for accuracy, identification of ambiguity, and use of a variety of expressions among language users. Likewise, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), issued by the council of Europe in 2001, defines grammar as the set of principles that govern phrase and sentence construction to convey meaning in a language. The CEFR presents syntax and morphology as the main levels of grammar, where the former refers to the organization of words into sentences to convey meaning, and the latter to the internal organization of words as roots, prefixes, suffixes, and infixes (Council of Europe, 2001). More specific constituents of grammar within these two levels, according to this framework, are listed below:

- elements, e.g. morphs (morphemes-roots and affixes words)
- categories, e.g. number, case, gender, concrete/abstract, countable/uncountable, (in)transitive, active/passive voice, past/present/future tense, progressive, (im)perfect aspect.
- classes, e.g. conjugations, declensions, open word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, closed word classes (grammatical elements).
- structures, e.g. compound and complex words, phrases (noun phrase, verb phrase, etc.), clauses: (main, subordinate, co-ordinate), sentences (simple, compound, complex)
- processes (descriptive), e.g. nominalization, affixation, suppletion, gradation, transposition, transformation
- relations, e.g. government, concord, valency.

According to Shuib (2009), for an efficient use of these resources, language users should develop grammatical awareness conducive to (1) the recognition of different grammatical categories and functions, (2) the description of a word or phrase in grammatical terms (metalanguage), (3) the correction of incorrect phrases or fragments, and (4) the explanation of infringed grammatical rules.

Researchers in the field advocate for a deliberate grammatical awareness development among learners, prospective and in-service teachers of English as a Foreign or

Second Language. As a case in point, Sert (2006) found that, when exposed to native speakers' discourse, learners achieve a better understanding of language and develop capacities to analyze and judge grammatical and ungrammatical structures. Moreover, Zhang and Hung (2014) explored the effectiveness of integrating awareness in a grammar course for second-year students at one English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university in China. They concluded that this strategy encouraged participants' positive feelings towards grammar and their motivation to use cognitive strategies such as analyzing the target language, which improved their writing and reading skills. On the other hand, Andrew's (1994) study to characterize English grammar knowledge and awareness among 141 English-as-a-Second-Language teachers and teacher trainees in Hong Kong revealed that although participants exhibited different levels of confidence, abilities and knowledge toward the grammar system and terminology, which varied according to their previous learning and teaching experiences, all of them agreed on the importance of knowing grammar rules and grammar terminology as part of their training.

Although research on grammatical awareness is not new, it is remarkably important in the field of language teaching education. In fact, Svalberg and Askham's (2014) study on how a student in a master's-level teacher education course in England builds her grammar knowledge ratifies that awareness helps to create analytical mindsets which promote better pedagogical practices. Similarly, Shuib's (2009) analysis of the level of grammatical awareness among in-service primary English teachers in Malaysia highlights the role of teachers' understanding and consciousness toward grammar rules and terms in correcting errors made by students in the classroom. Since the study evidenced participants' lack of grammar knowledge, which may affect their teaching practices, it advocates for giving more emphasis to grammar exposure in teacher language training. In addition, the author calls for more studies that consider English language teachers' needs regarding their grammatical awareness. Altogether, by developing grammatical awareness, prospective English teachers would be better positioned to guide their future learners towards an appropriate use of the foreign language grammar system and to efficiently engage in academic writing.

Sultan (2013) defines academic writing as "a distinct style of writing used by those in academia and research communities that is noted for its detached objectivity, its use of critical analysis and its presentation of well-structured, clear arguments based on evidence and reason" (p. 141). According to Sowton (2012), academic writing is characterized by its objectivity as the writer is expected to provide enough evidence to support ideas. Moreover, academic writing is complex since it requires the use of formal language, particular grammatical structures, and a wide range of content words. Finally, according to the author, formality of structures, as well as the number of references used, makes academic writing different from other types of writing.

Regarding performance in academic writing, Singh, Singh, Razak, and Ravinthar (2017) analyzed the most common mistakes in essays written by Malaysian tertiary education students who had taken English courses. Findings reveal inadequate grammatical

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knowledge of several parts of the English language system, especially of tenses and subject-verb agreement. Consequently, researchers remark the need for integrating grammar explicit instruction in language teaching and learning. Likewise, Fengje, Jia, and Hongyi (2016) examined the written production from college students in a Chinese context to identify grammatical mistakes, causes and solutions to improve participants' writing skills. Findings suggest that the most common mistakes were related to the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. According to the researchers, these mistakes can be explained by mother tongue interference, differences in cultural backgrounds, and incomplete English knowledge. Finally, they advocate for 1) encouraging development of students' writing habits, 2) comparing and analyzing mother tongue and target language, 3) putting grammar knowledge in context, and 4) analyzing grammatical phenomena.

The study

The major objective of this research was to explore prospective English language teachers' grammatical awareness development through a case study embedded in an interpretive paradigm. According to Creswell (2014), a case study can be defined as

A qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case(s) are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time. (p. 290)

The strategy used to select participants was a homogeneous sampling. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013) a homogeneous sampling is encompassed by individuals who share defining and similar characteristics within a certain community. Participants in this study were a group of 19 prospective English language teachers (7 female and 12 male, aged 21 to 32 years), whose native language is Spanish, enrolled in advanced courses in an English language teaching program.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, and selected pieces from prospective teachers' academic written production. Individual and focus groups interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. In order to analyze and interpret data, the researchers used the steps suggested by Creswell (2014): organizing data, reading and rereading raw data as well as field notes, coding, generating categories or themes for analysis, and making an interpretation of the findings.

Quality of the study was ensured by peer examination and member checking. Peer examination involved having peers review the different phases of the research to confirm appropriateness of analysis and data interpretation. Member checking required asking participants for verification of findings retrieved from collected data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Findings from this study revealed internal and external factors that influence prospective teachers' grammatical awareness development in this particular context. It was found that participants had developed a low level of grammatical awareness which can explain the considerable quantity and the nature of grammatical errors remaining in their academic texts. Factors associated to participants' grammatical awareness development evidenced in this research are explained in subsequent lines.

Prospective English teachers' enrollment in grammar courses

Grammar courses in the English teaching program are optional. Nevertheless, data analysis revealed that a vast majority of participants have taken at least one of them. The most common reasons for which they feel motivated to enroll themselves in such courses include 1) to improve their writing skills, 2) to be able to correct their own grammar mistakes, and 3) to be prepared to teach.

"My expectations would be improving my writing... to know more about structures of the language because perhaps I get them wrong sometimes, so it would be more like learning how to write." [Participant 18]¹

"My expectations when taking a grammar course are to learn the grammar rules, so I can teach, express myself well, and to know how to make it easier for students to learn the topic." [Participant 3]

"To learn how to write, and not to have mistakes in my writing... to have a basis when I am going to teach my students." [Participant 16]

"...to improve my current knowledge, because I was feeling I was making a lot of mistakes in grammar... so to correct those mistakes and to learn about grammar." [Participant 11]

These personal aims and interests can be considered factors which positively contribute to prospective English language teachers' grammatical awareness development. However, although participants have clear and meaningful purposes for taking grammar courses, they often cannot take all of them because of external factors. These include inconvenient schedules, the availability of more appealing elective courses, uninspiring methodologies proposed by some teacher educators, and previous experiences in courses where the importance of grammar was undermined by a strong emphasis on other aspects of the communicative competence.

¹ It is important to remark that quotes directly written in English by participants may contain ungrammatical statements.

“I know that there are some courses that are about grammar, but I have not taken those... it was because the schedule, it was not good for me and I wanted to take other course that was about music... the other course in that time... calls call my attention more than the other.” [Participant 1]

“Grammar has been punished here and teachers show us that grammar is something that it is not useful for our Colombian students because it is very difficult, not necessary.” [Participant 10]

“If you know that the teacher just fills the board, he/she is boring and what he is going to say you can find it on a text book, it is better not to take the course. So, I think that the methodology and the pedagogical aspect influence.” [Participant 13; translated from Spanish]

External factors mentioned above discourage future English language teachers from engaging in explicit and formal grammar instruction through specialized courses. Therefore, it could be inferred that their grammatical awareness development will be affected and their chances to succeed in writing academic texts will be less since, according to Andrews (1999b), having a greater dominance in the grammar system of the language is one fundamental ability to develop grammatical awareness.

Similarly, Zhang and Hung (2014) state that L2/FL language learners cannot perform entirely well without explicit grammar teaching. As “learning grammar through formal instruction can facilitate language acquisition” (Ellis as cited in Zhang & Hung, 2014, p. 107), it is necessary to teach it by formal classroom instruction (Shen, 2012).

Pre-service teachers’ perceptions towards grammar

Varied participants’ views of grammar appeared as an internal factor that can also affect their grammatical awareness development. Those perspectives involve 1) prospective teachers’ consideration of grammar as being relevant to effective teaching, 2) their view of L1 grammar as both a facilitator and a constraint in learning the target language grammar, 3) their positive and negative feelings towards grammar teaching and learning, and 4) their perception of the role of grammar in written discourse.

Importance of grammar for an English language teacher. Participants perceive grammar to be significant in their process of becoming English language teachers; therefore, they strongly believe that excluding it from their training could be a mistake. They remark that beyond using the language, as language teachers they must master it. Consequently, participants prefer grammar to be taught explicitly in order to explore the language deeply by knowing how it works.

“We are going to become English language teachers; we are not just going to be language users but language teachers. If we are supposed to be language teachers, we need to know explicit grammar.” [Participant 7]

“Grammar should be mandatory because we as teachers must have the knowledge to be able to explain our students, if they make a mistake, where things come from, we must know how to explain it from a linguistic view.” [Participant 8; translated from Spanish]

It is evident that for most participants English language teachers should not be hindered from receiving explicit grammar teaching. Regarding this idea, Thornbury (as cited in Andrews, 2007) asserts that “the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language enables them to teach effectively” (p. 945). Additionally, Andrews (1999a) claims that prospective language teachers’ explicit knowledge of grammar might lead to effective professional teaching practices. Consequently, it can be assumed that this grammar knowledge learned through explicit methodologies becomes the basis for pre-service English language teachers to be able to explain the grammar system appropriately which, according to Njika (2015), is one of the conditions to develop grammatical awareness.

L1 grammar as a facilitator or constraint to learn foreign language grammar. Some participants believe that Spanish (L1) and English (Foreign Language) share some similarities in their grammar systems. Therefore, they use their knowledge of L1 grammar to help themselves interpret and apply rules when performing in the target language.

“Spanish grammar has helped me because I normally tend to translate English sentences to Spanish ones, so knowing the Spanish structure, I realize how structures have to be in English... for example, present perfect in English is very similar to the present perfect in Spanish; it is almost the same. So, I relate both and likewise I have an idea and it helps me.” [Participant 8; translated from Spanish]

“... Spanish has some kind of structures and rules English has, so I can compare those structures and rules with Spanish ones, so in that way I can find the differences and make adjustments in order to produce a good speech.” [Participant 11]

In contrast, other participants think of Spanish as being totally different from English. Consequently, they consider that L1 grammar is far from helping them understand and produce rules and structures that govern the target language.

“... in terms on grammar, they are very different... if I am going to use my mother tongue as a base for constructing a sentence in English, it is not

going to be useful because those little details Spanish has. I consider is an obstacle.” [Participant 10]

According to Arshad, Abdolrahimpour and Najafi (2015), through L1, learners of foreign languages could develop self-regulation and faster thinking which may help transfer their cognitive and metacognitive skills to ease L2 learning. It implies that participants who compare both languages to understand grammar better use cognitive and metacognitive skills that contribute to grammatical awareness development which involves sensitivity to how the language works (Andrews, 1994).

Positive and negative feelings towards grammar. For some participants, grammar has always evoked positive feelings. They associate the term to words such as enjoyment, love, organization, excellence, happiness, and success.

“I’ve always loved grammar, I read a lot of books of grammar actually and maybe that is why... people say that grammar is not enough to be competent, to have a proficient level in English, but grammar for me is very different, I love it and for me it is a feeling of happiness.” [Participant 15]

Conversely, other participants expressed having neutral or negative feelings towards grammar which changed into positive ones after being immersed in the experience of becoming English language teachers.

“Grammar was kind of difficult and demanding at the beginning, but then I developed a feeling of pleasure when using it in my academic discourse essays or whatever I have to write for the 8th semester... At the beginning, I felt not very comfortable using it, but now I enjoy it, I, I enjoy learning grammar. Right now, is pleasure.” [Participant 7]

“Grammar used to make me feel bored and kind of frustrated, but later when being in this English language teaching program, when I understood everything, I saw grammar differently. I like grammar a lot because it gives me a feeling of order.” [Participant 2; translated from Spanish]

Negative feelings towards grammar such as boredom, fear, frustration, stress, difficulty, anxiety, and confusion were found among participants. According to them, these feelings could have originated from bad connotations of grammar, usually encouraged by teachers or peers in the classroom, or because of their lack of grammar knowledge.

“Stress, confusion, frustration... for example I feel frustrated due to complex tenses. I do everything I can, but I do not understand, I did not internalize grammar... then, I feel frustration.” [Participant 13; translated from Spanish]

“Grammar is the boring part of English language, it makes me feel discomfort. Now, I know it is necessary; however, it continues on making me feel a kind of discomfort. It is very difficult, but I need it... I relate it to mathematics.” [Participant 19; translated Spanish]

Although studies about the impact of feelings toward grammar learning on grammatical awareness development are scarce, Hos & Kekec's (2015) research shows that the effectiveness of language learning could be negatively affected by the beliefs and attitudes students have. In the same manner, Ahmadi & Shaffie (2015) affirm that “learners’ beliefs not only influence their approaches to language learning but also affect the way they respond to teaching activities” (p. 247). Consequently, it can be assumed that a similar effect could emerge when prospective teachers experience negative feelings toward grammar learning. This situation could lead them to develop low levels of grammatical awareness since such negative feelings would cause lack of interest to use grammar correctly even in the creation of academic texts.

On the other hand, it can be inferred that prospective teachers’ positive feelings towards grammar would favor their development of grammatical awareness. Schuman (as cited in Méndez Lopez, 2011) states that when learning a foreign language, feelings are vital to understand and perform successfully in the new language since emotions also shape students’ cognition. Hence, participants who possess positive feelings would be better positioned to learn a new language and to develop grammatical awareness compared to participants who hold negative feelings towards grammar.

The role of grammar in written production. For prospective English language teachers, grammar is closely related to written discourse. According to them, unlike spoken language, in written communication grammar plays a central role in order to provide clarity. Consequently, participants’ attention towards accuracy in the selection of grammar structures is mainly activated when attaining writing tasks.

“The intention of writing is proving performance of the language, because for example when I am speaking I make mistakes, but I can correct them immediately. But in writing the intention is that everything is completely clear and explicit. So, that is why I think grammar is associated with writing.” [Participant 10]

“...when a person is talking you are paying attention to the meaning. There are some things that are impossible to notice throughout speech, but there are others that you can only perceive when you are writing, when you have a written composition. Through an oral speech for me is impossible, so that's why people tend to do that connection between grammar and writing, because grammar can be only be perceived through writing.” [Participant 9]

Participants' acknowledgment of the relevant role that grammar plays in written discourse is supported by Baleghizadeh & Gordani (2012) who state that clear and accurate conventions of grammar ensure clarity and avoid ambiguity when writing. Nonetheless, the fact that participants recognize this is not enough to claim that they have developed grammatical awareness. According to Andrews (1994), one of the characteristics of such awareness is paying attention to the meaning we convey and the language we use in communication. Oshima & Hogue (1998) claim that grammar structures help defining the writing tone and style. This is remarkably important if we consider that prospective teachers are expected to write for academic purposes. Therefore, beyond recognizing its importance, in order for future teachers to show grammatical awareness they should be able to identify and explain faulty or unclear sentences in order to correct them. According to data analysis, few participants acknowledged having these types of skills.

Prospective English language teachers' ability for correcting grammar in written texts

After asking participants during one of the focus group interviews to evaluate a set of sentences which were grammatically incorrect, it was found that they can perceive grammar mistakes in written texts through either unconscious or conscious ways. In the first case, around half of the prospective teachers admitted that they can recognize acceptable or unacceptable grammar usage because the text simply does not make sense to them, without being able to justify their opinions based on grammar rules. According to Smith (2008), "we might be faced with learners who are able to "feel" that a given utterance was ungrammatical without being able to analyze why this should be so" (p. 182). For this author, these types of learners can correct their errors although they do not understand where their errors come from.

"I do it unconsciously. If I'm just reading something and if I see something... I ask, "What is this?" doesn't make sense to me. So, I read again, and I see that it's not well-structured, but I don't give it an explanation... I don't go into the grammar aspect of it... I see that it's incorrect, but I don't think about grammar I just know it's incorrect."
[Participant 3]

"I recognize what is missing or... or perhaps I see that is weird, that it doesn't fit a word in there... there are things that are too weird for me or too complex that I don't know... I wonder but I don't know what it is."
[Participant 16]

Additionally, it was found that among these participants there exists the tendency to have peers check and correct grammar mistakes in their written production as an alternative to self-correction.

"Most of the time, I do not trust myself when writing texts. It is like an internal fight where I look, and I read again. I try to identify if I made a

mistake before handing in my written text. However, I do not frequently do it. I leave my text as it is because when I start questioning myself, I do not know how to answer my questions. I do not know if I am making a mistake or not. What I do is to tell a classmate to revise my text. Then, I see if the correction keeps with the ideas I wrote in my original written text. In my case, it is better that a classmate or a teacher tells me if the text is good or not.” [Participant 2; translated from Spanish]

“What happens is that we do not have a self-assessing culture. It frequently happens to me that if I write something and I know that I have certain mistakes somewhere, I won’t find the mistake because I do not have the knowledge to do so. Therefore, I think that one will always ask someone to tell how we are doing in our texts.” [Participant 10; translated from Spanish]

Otherwise, the rest of the participants expressed that they are able to consciously notice acceptable or unacceptable grammar usage in written texts based on understandings of the grammar system of the language. Accordingly, this knowledge helps them recognize mistakes they are familiar with and therefore correct them.

“It’s easy to recognize those well-formed phrases... taking into account my previous knowledge about syntax, I could give an explanation about what is wrong or what’s missing or what I should change.” [Participant 17]

Prospective teachers who consciously identify grammar mistakes in their written production usually rely on a set of strategies to self-monitor and correct such mistakes. These strategies involve looking closely at accurate samples of structures they had found difficult to manage within their texts, re-reading, and editing. To do so, participants use different tools such as internet websites, videos, music, books, or texts books.

“Talking about grammar, I would say writing, because when I write, I am like... I look for words, and structures and that’s when I learn.” [Participant 18]

“What I simply do is that I look what I write, then I correct, then I re-write. It’s like a process.” [Participant 7]

“I look for a website. It has grammar sections. It has basic, intermediate, and advanced lessons. I always use all of them. Basic grammar to review and advanced to learn”. [Participant 10; translated from Spanish]

“I google it, search on the internet examples or explanations and then I correct.” [Participant 17]

Prospective teachers who engage in processes that involve noticing, reflection, or conscious analysis of linguistic processes upon knowledge of subject matter develop metacognition (Wright & Brumfit as cited in Andrews, 2001), which is an essential feature of grammatical awareness. Notwithstanding, a significant number of prospective teachers in this study were unable to analyze and explain mistakes in written texts by invoking grammatical principles and rules, signaling a gap in their grammatical awareness development. This lack of metacognition could have a negative effect on their academic written production and, eventually, could prevent them from approaching their future learners' grammatical difficulties accurately.

Prospective English language teachers' ability to produce metalanguage. According to data analysis, a reduced amount of participants in this study dared to answer when asked to define terms such as grammar, syntax, and morphology. Moreover, far from offering a complete idea that expressed their understanding of these concepts, they resorted to very short statements or isolated words. Furthermore, it was evident that they did not clearly distinguish among the terms presented or between these and other concepts used in the language field. For instance, they defined the term grammar by associating it with words like structures, rules, form, system, coherence, cohesion, tenses, concepts, regulation, correctness, vocabulary, semantics, and competence. Syntax was understood as creating meaning from words, spelling and organizing them. Regarding morphology, participants affirmed that it concerns the organization, composition and shape of words, suffixes, prefixes, and punctuation.

"Being honest, I don't really know. I have not gone further regarding syntax. I do not feel confident enough to define the concept, and I would not know how to explain it. About morphology, I am not very familiarized with it either, I know that it is like the form of the words; however, I would not be able to defend myself in that field." [Participant 2; translated from Spanish]

"Syntax Yes. I get really confused; syntax is the way in which language is organized? Like the way in which you organized language, right? Sorry my experience is really poor... Morphology? This is so sad... morphology? I don't know about that." [Participant 5]

Prospective English language teachers' superficial definitions, often not aligned with what these terms really mean, as well as their inability to define them, evidenced their limited capacity to produce appropriate metalanguage, considered by Andrews (1999a) as an essential feature of grammatical awareness. According to the author (as cited in Shuib, 2009), metalanguage can be defined as the ability to describe a word or phrase in grammatical terms. Accordingly, this lack of metalanguage could limit prospective teachers' ability to look for grammatical explanations when correcting any mistake in their own academic written production since they would not label it appropriately.

Teacher educators' remarks on prospective teachers' academic written production

Many of the pieces of academic writing provided by participants had already been graded by their teachers. Although the main purpose for analyzing these texts was to check their current ability to use syntax and morphology, the fact that teacher educators seemed to ignore prospective teachers' grammar errors, in most of them, was surprising. Even in those few cases in which the teacher called the writer's attention towards grammar, this was done just by circling the fragment considering revision and adding a note such as "check grammar", without providing a specific remark on what needed correction. This situation represents a constraint in future language teachers' development of grammatical awareness. According to Singh et al. (2017), it is teachers' (in this case teacher educators) adequate feedback provided after reviewing written pieces, as well as the opportunities they offer learners to rewrite, which contributes to high quality production. In addition, teacher educators should require students to hand in corrected versions of their written production where newly acquired grammar can be applied (Bourke, 2008).

Prospective English language teachers' use of syntax and morphology in academic texts

Samples of academic written texts produced by participants were analyzed with the aim of determining appropriateness in the use of syntax and morphology. Results showed that prospective teachers' most typical errors were related to verb conjugation and misuse of definite and indefinite articles, adjectives, prepositions, nouns, pronouns, and conjunctions, which evidenced preservice teachers' lack of grammatical awareness.

Common mistakes regarding the use of verbs found in participants' texts were linked to subject-verb agreement for the third person in the simple present tense, regular and irregular forms of verbs in the past tense, and treatment of gerunds and infinitives. According to Fengjie, Jia, and Hongy (2016), although verb conjugation in the third person could be easily learned in early stages in the English language process, errors related to this kind of conjugation may be still visible long after. This can happen either by learners' lack of attention while writing or due to the excessive length of the attributive after subject which can lead the writer to incorrectly use the verb (p.24). On the other hand, participants' misuse of regular and irregular verb past forms can be explained by having to memorize irregular verb forms when learning the past tense; therefore, "some students are still confused by whether a word has a regular form or not" (op. cit., p .24).

In like manner, participants' lack of knowledge about the use of gerunds as nouns after certain verbs and prepositions, as well as infinitives that must be used after certain verbs or adjectives to show purpose was evident. Problems related to not knowing when to use infinitives or gerunds are very common as there are not specific rules for using them (Common challenges for Spanish-speaking learners of English, n.d). Besides, Spanish speakers would find this quite confusing since their native language always takes the infinitive form after a verb (Rizzo & Villafane, 1975).

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Additionally, data analysis revealed overuse of the definite article *the* as well as use of the indefinite article *a/an* for referring to plural nouns. These determiners were mistakenly used by participants who added an *n* before a consonant sound or did not write it before a vowel sound. In the first case, as expressed in previous lines, these types of mistakes can be explained by participants' L1 interference. Regarding the second situation, Rizzo & Villafane (1975) affirm that as this kind of rule has no equivalent in Spanish, it is hard for students to master it in the foreign language. Another common mistake found in participants' texts which can be associated to L1 interference is related to the use of adjectives, either wrongly placed or pluralized by prospective teachers. Even in attributive position, adjectives in Spanish can come after the noun and they must agree in number with the latter which can cause English learners to become easily confused (op. cit).

The most common problem found with the use of prepositions in participants' texts was related to wrong selection or absence, which affected clarity in many cases. Shen (2012) agrees on that these mistakes often result from mother tongue interference. Furthermore, Singh et al. (2017) revealed that another possible cause associated to prepositions misuse is the poor knowledge students have towards this grammatical category. Furthermore, these authors agree that frequent mistakes are made by students who do not see how prepositions affect meaning in sentences, so they use them carelessly (p. 24).

Another common mistake found in participants' pieces of writing dealt with the misplacement or omission of nouns and pronouns. Muchemwa's (2015) study presents a similar case, regarding frequent omission of relevant words in sentences written by college English learners. According to the author, this type of mistake can be explained by learners' mother tongue interference, overgeneralization and oversimplification of rules.

Prospective teachers' inaccurate use of relative pronouns such as *who*, *that* and *which* was also an issue in their written production. Even though relative pronouns play an important role when writing elaborated sentences, they are often mistaken (Common challenges for Spanish-speaking learners of English, n.d). This can happen because in Spanish the relative pronoun "que" is often used to refer both to people and objects; consequently, students usually use *who*, *that*, and *which* interchangeably in English. In terms of subject and object pronouns, the most common mistake is the participants' use of subject instead of object pronouns, causing some parts of their text to sound odd. Lastly, analysis evidenced prospective teachers' failures for appropriate selection and use of conjunctions. According to Fengjie et al. (2016), this can happen due to students' lack of understanding about the role conjunctions play in meaning-making.

In alignment with previous research, this study has signaled college students' errors in academic writing related to the use of nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions. It can be stated that most of these grammar mistakes occur because of native language transfers to the target language, not enough attention towards grammar system, or limited knowledge on some aspects of grammar. Nevertheless, although correction of

grammar mistakes should be approached as a common practice among prospective teachers, there is the need to implement both cognitive and metacognitive strategies conducive to the development of grammatical awareness that help them notice, analyze, and involve themselves in the correction of imprecise phrases or fragments (Andrews as cited in Shuib, 2009). In that manner, explicit grammar teaching is fundamental for prospective teachers' grammatical awareness development as it promotes metalinguistic abilities, knowledge of language system, and consciousness towards language.

Conclusions and implications

This study provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of the existence of some factors which could negatively affect prospective English language teachers' grammatical awareness development: 1) grammar courses are not mandatory for pre-service teachers in this context, 2) their grammatical terminology knowledge is not fully developed, 3) some of them have negative feelings toward grammar, 4) pre-service teachers' educators have stigmatized grammar learning, 5) grammar mistakes are unconsciously recognized or not recognized at all by pre-service teachers, 6) the prospective teacher lacks self-assessment for grammar correction, and 7) teacher educators do not make explicit remarks in pre-service teachers' written production. Consequently, these factors can lead English language teachers to not entirely develop grammatical awareness to succeed in academic writing.

Nonetheless, positive factors associated to pre-service teachers' grammatical awareness development were also found. The fact that participants see grammar as relevant in the process of becoming language teachers, the presence of some positive feelings towards grammar, their view of academic writing as closely connected to grammar, a certain degree of consciousness towards grammar use, and the recognition of some tools to improve grammar knowledge and use, can be considered favorable conditions for prospective teachers to develop grammatical awareness to attain academic writing tasks.

The aforementioned description of negative and positive factors influencing the development of future English language teachers' grammatical awareness should serve in setting pertinent strategies through which teacher educators may address prospective teachers' real needs to help them succeed in their efforts to produce high quality academic writing. Some of the strategies aligned with the findings of the study encompass requiring grammar courses with high levels of explicit instruction that allows for dominance of the grammar system and development of grammar terminology/concepts.

In addition, grammar stigmatization should be abolished. Teacher educators must consider that their students, who are prospective English language teachers, must not only use the language but also master it to be able to teach it correctly. In this manner, grammar should be again invited to classrooms, not leaving it aside due to the advent of communicative approaches. Moreover, educators who are involved in prospective teacher

education should highlight the importance that grammar has in writing so that prospective teachers see it as an important component of academic written texts.

Another important strategy that can be used to develop grammatical awareness is enhancing conscious recognition of the grammar system either in grammatical or ungrammatical written pieces. Teacher educators could implement plans in which prospective language teachers apply their grammar knowledge to notice, reflect, and correct infringed sentences. Likewise, self-assessment should be also favored, for students to have greater strategies to recognize quality in their own work, along with recognizing their weaknesses and strengths in terms of grammar knowledge and use. Finally, special attention should be paid to the quality of remarks made by teacher educators on prospective teachers' written production. They should include relevant and adequate information for prospective language teachers to understand the error and be able to correct it.

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