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13 Grammar is the heart of language: grammar and its role in language learning among Finnish university students

Pekka Saaristo¹

Abstract

This article presents and discusses views on grammar and its role in formal language learning amongst Finnish university students. The results are based on a questionnaire which was distributed to students at the University of Jyväskylä as part of institutional action research. The background to the project was a feeling amongst some teachers of increased divergence between student respectively language teacher understandings of the role of grammar in language teaching. This concern raised the need to find out how students view grammar. The knowledge about thoughts on grammar amongst students would then help teachers to adjust and adept the way grammar is used in language teaching. The main finding of the questionnaire was that a majority of the students think of grammar as a valuable asset in language learning, but at the same time have somewhat different understandings of grammar. In this context grammar is understood as a metalinguistic set of (also normative) statements of regularities in language which is the way most students think of grammar. Three different student perspectives on grammar are distinguished. These include a normative, functional and structural perspective. Since all answers in the questionnaire couldn't be placed within these categories, a fourth category, "other" was also included.

keywords: grammar, language learning, folk linguistics/sociolinguistics, emic/etic, written language, normativity, functionality.

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1. Introduction

During the 2008–2009 semester, a group of teachers at the Language Centre at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland decided to learn something more about how university students look at formal grammar and grammar instruction in language learning and teaching. We shared a concern about a possible widening conceptual and terminological gap between the pre-understandings of teachers and students regarding language teaching and learning. Discrepancies between teacher and student understandings of language learning cannot be beneficial for learning outcomes (see [Brown 2009](#); [Horwitz 1988](#); [Jean & Simard 2011](#); [Rättyä 2014](#); [Schulz 2001](#)). It is, of course, not possible or even necessary for learners' and teachers' views on language learning and, for example, the role of grammar to match completely (see [Jean & Simard 2011](#)). However, a fairly common understanding of the rationale behind teaching and the concepts utilised seems to benefit learning.

To learn more about the students' views on grammar in language learning, our group of teachers developed a questionnaire. As the title of this article suggests, I do not present all the questions and results from the survey. Instead, my focus is on a single two-part open-ended question: "Briefly describe what you understand by the word *grammar* and what role grammar has in language teaching and learning." The general idea with this question was to find out what kind of pre-understandings the students have about grammar and how they see it as a part of language teaching and learning. One practical aim was to use the results to adapt the use of grammar in our teaching to better match the students' understandings and points of departure. The answers to this question also created a framework for understanding other answers in the questionnaire.

The article begins with a short description of the respondents. This is followed by a discussion of some preliminary issues. The concepts of *grammar* and *teaching method* are discussed in brief and some premises for the study are presented. As expected, the opinions on grammar varied (see [Mori 1999](#)) and the answers in the questionnaire are presented under four headings, each expressing a different perspective: *normative*, *functional*, *structural* and *other*. Before

discussion of the *other* category, I present the views on the role of grammar in language teaching and learning. The aim with these categorisations is to organise the answers according to salient factors expressed in the answers. The basis for the categorisations is also explained. Since written language seems to have a special role in many formulations in the answers, this modality is also briefly discussed, especially when presenting the more normative or prescriptive views on grammar. The answers are exemplified through more or less prototypical answers. I end the article with some reflections on the role grammar can play in teaching and learning.

2. The data

The results which are presented are based on written answers ($N = 189$) to the question of how students define grammar and relate it to language learning and teaching. The respondents consist of students from all of the different faculties at the University of Jyväskylä (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Questionnaire respondents by faculty²

Faculty	n
Faculty of Humanities	28
Faculty of Information Technology	17
Faculty of Education	10
Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences	21
Faculty of Mathematics and Science	38
Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics	39
Faculty of Social Sciences	36
	189

The answers have not been correlated for background factors such as faculty membership or, for example, gender. (For more on the relationship between gender and grammar in language learning, see [Rieger 2009](#) and [Jean & Simard 2011](#)). The aim is to present the ways the students understand grammar and its

2. The number of respondents from the different faculties is not representative of the number of students in each faculty

role in language learning and teaching on a general level. For the sake of brevity I have left out information regarding faculty membership, sex and age. The sexes were distributed evenly and the average age among the respondents was 26 years. Students who study a language as their major subject were excluded from the sample. In the next section I discuss grammar and teaching methods in order to make some pre-understandings of the subject more explicit.

3. Grammars and teaching methods

Grammar is a key concept in general linguistic theory, but a more thorough discussion of how the concept of grammar has been, and can be, understood is beyond the scope of this article. Writers on the subject usually make different distinctions between theoretical, (traditional) descriptive/reference and (traditional) pedagogical grammars (Aarts 2006; Kachru 2010; Leech 1994; Odlin 1994; Tonkyn 1994). In general, pedagogical grammars (Chalker 1994; Corder 1988; Taylor 2008) seem to be about “usefulness rather than the theory of adequacy or simplicity postulated for pure grammars” (Spolsky 1978: 5).

In other words, grammars function as aids to learning instead of being an object for knowledge per se (Corder 1988; Kachru 2010; Rutherford 1987, 1988 for more on grammars written for other practical purposes, see Leitner & Graustein 1989)³. The role of the descriptive linguist is to describe and analyse structures and rules without any consideration of didactic or pedagogical matters (see Achard 2004; Kachru 2010; Nikula 2003; Rutherford 1987; Wilkins 1974). Furthermore, theoretical grammars often aim to prove or support a certain theoretical view on language and/or grammar or a descriptive ideal, whereas pedagogical grammars can afford to be more eclectic and utilise insights from different types of grammatical description according to the practical goals of learning and on the basis of practical experience (Corder 1988; Rutherford 1988; Taylor 2008).

3. There is also a tradition advocating almost no explicit use of grammar in language teaching. This tradition has occurred under different labels (Krashen 1982, 1999; Prabhu 1987; see Kachru 2010; Littlewood 2012; Rutherford 1987; Tonkyn 1994; Trappes-Lomax 2002; Yip 1994). The anti-grammar reaction (probably meaning reaction of a certain way of using grammar in teaching) was then followed by a counterstrike in the 1980s and 1990s (Joseph 2002; Tonkyn 1994; Trappes-Lomax 2002).

Although pedagogical grammars are planned for different purposes than theoretical grammars are, it seems that the substance of pedagogical grammars are or should be informed by developments in general linguistic description and that at least some teachers are aware of developments within linguistics. They cannot, of course, be atheoretical either and pedagogical grammars are also descriptive in some sense of the word (see [Dirven 1989](#); [Hasan & Perrett 1994](#); [Leech 1994](#); [Leitner & Graustein 1989](#); [Tomlin 1994](#); [Westney 1994](#); [Wilkins 1974](#)).

If, as suggested by [Leech \(1994\)](#), “teacher’s grammar” is located somewhere between “academic grammar” (theoretical and descriptive) and “grammar for the learner” (practical, selective, task-oriented etc.), there seems to be at least an indirect connection between folk and expert views on language (see [Coupland & Jaworski 2004](#)). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that, from a folk linguistic (i.e. a non-linguist) perspective, grammar or grammars usually are understood as normative formal rules codified in books and/or presented by teachers (see [Odlin 1994](#)). Grammar is, in other words, understood to be an explicit metalinguistic description of a languages, which themselves are understood as imagined singularities such as “Spanish”, “Russian”, “Norwegian Bokmål” and so on.

It seems likely that people often equate grammar with grammar books and institutional language learning. The opinions of the usefulness of an explicit focus on grammar vary and some students prefer ‘communicating’ as a way of learning. Obviously one can make oneself understood without applying existing structural features in a language (see [Cook 1989](#); [Nikula 2003](#); [Tonkyn 1994](#)). The view that you can communicate without grammar may stem from a perceived dichotomy between lexis and grammar, where grammar is given a lesser communicative and interactional role. From a linguistic point of view, on the other hand, lexis and grammar share communicative responsibilities and should not be seen as separate entities (see [Boers & Lindstromberg 2006](#); [Broccias 2008](#); [Langacker 2008](#); [Widdowson 1988](#)). Words and structural elements form dynamic and parallel semiotic resources for performing communicative pragmatic functions and constructing meanings in specific

languages, dialects, sociolects and ethnolects. Therefore so-called grammarless methods can only be seen as idealised abstractions and to separate grammar from communicative competence seems odd (see Achard 2004). In line with Widdowson (1988), one could actually claim that language learning essentially is grammar learning, but stating that grammar is unavoidable in language use and learning does not, of course, imply a certain view on language learning or that grammatical phenomena should be focused on explicitly (see Liamkina & Ryshina-Pankova 2012; Spada 2011; Spada & Lightbown 2008; Taylor 2008; Yip 1994). The topic-related choices made in teaching (e.g. semantic topics, communicative functions) also obviously affect the grammatical structures used in meaning construction (Nikula 2003; Rutherford 1988).

As stated, a specific view on grammar in language learning does not mechanistically correspond to a view of a specific preference of learning strategies or teaching methods. Even those who would see an explicit focus on grammar as of little or no value for successful language learning would probably not deny that form, as such, also carries meaning and has communicative and interactional functions (Rutherford 1988). In broader terms, this means that a view on language and metalinguistic knowledge in general does not necessarily imply a specific view of language learning (see Andrews 1999; Corder 1988). From the teacher's point of view, this may be seen as a truism in a "postmethod" era (Kumaravadivelu 1994; for other views of language teachers and learners, cf. Bell 2003, 2007; Block 2001) when the search for *the* method seems pointless and varying learning strategies are acknowledged (Adamson 2004; Ellis 2004; Joseph 2002; Leech 1994; Prahbu 1990; Rutherford 1987).

My personal experience is that most language teachers tend to be pragmatic towards the fads and trends in language teaching, successfully using old practices – never mind how old – and at the same time showing willingness to try new methods, often reconstructing these for specific purposes. In other words, teachers have effectively always been, as Bell (2007: 143) suggests, "beyond methods". I certainly hope that language teachers are not affected by "monotheistic approaches", following fashionable teaching methods while

“demonising others” (see [Adamson 2004](#): 611). In general, methods may not be as coherent packages as sometimes thought but rather they may be seen as general characterisations, and the concept of a teaching method itself might have a range of different meanings ([Brumfit 1991](#)). The role of canonical teaching methods in practical teaching seems to be exaggerated (see the teacher comments in [Bell 2007](#); see also [Bell 2003](#)). Whether we like to consider teaching habits to be methods or not might be a matter of taste, but going beyond method does not, of course, equal lacking a systematic approach ([Bell 2007](#)). Most teachers have probably rid themselves of the Cartesian fear ([Bernstein 1983](#)) of not having absolute certainty about the best method or, for that matter, that we should throw out method altogether as the principle to follow.

4. Some other premises

The present study could be seen as belonging to the sociolinguistic field known as folk linguistics ([Hoenigswald 1966](#); [Niedzielski & Preston 2003](#); [Pasquale 2011](#); [Preston 2006](#)) and sociolinguistic research on language related opinions and attitudes (see [Edwards 2006](#); [Garrett, Coupland & Williams 2003](#)) in general. Folk linguistics also forms a natural perspective within applied linguistics, because it often deals with practical linguistic issues and problems. It seems evident that language education can benefit from the knowledge of learner views in specific speech communities ([Niedzielski & Preston 2003](#); [Preston 2004, 2006](#); [Wilton & Stegu 2011](#)). If the long tradition of prescriptive school grammar has led to a view that language learning essentially is about separating ‘wrong’ from ‘right’ and learning rules, and this tradition has prevailed throughout the 20th century ([Harjunen & Korhonen 2008](#); [Odlin 1994](#); [Paunonen 2006](#); [Preston 2006](#); [Vattovaara & Soininen-Stojanov 2006](#); [Wilkins 1974](#)), it seems likely that this would affect the layperson’s understandings of language and how it should be learned (see [Harris 1996](#); [Hiidenmaa 2007](#); [Niedzielski & Preston 2003](#)). As can be expected, the issue of right vs. wrong was mentioned in the answers in the questionnaire. This is in line with a widespread traditional idea of linguistic entities having a single ‘correct’ form ([Harris 1996](#); see also [Preston 2004, 2006](#)).

The question about grammar was formulated in a fairly open way and lacked theoretical (apart from grammar) concepts that could steer the answers in a certain direction. The aim was, in other words, to avoid using overly specific formulations expressing certain theoretical views on the subject, which might undermine the folk linguistic objective of learning about common views (Vattovaara 2012).

In terminology stemming from Pike (1967) and often used in other disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, we can also conceptualise the situation as a dialogue between theoretically generated etic-concepts and user-based emic-conceptions in which the emic-views are seen as an important part in the research on social reality (see Hymes 1964; Saville-Troike 2003). An emic-approach is, naturally, also a part of many studies on beliefs about language learning (Barcelos & Kalaja 2003, 2011). The answers about grammar presented in this study seem to represent a mix of more ‘autonomous’ views together with more institutionally informed opinions on the matter, the latter views probably echoing an etic-perspective within the institutions of language education as they are encountered in concrete learning situations. If we imagined a dialogue between a linguist and a layperson, the conversation would show diverging as well as converging views on grammar and language in general (see Coupland & Jaworski 2009; Lillis 2013; Vattovaara 2012).

The study might also be anchored in the discipline of applied linguistics because it deals with a ‘problem’, especially one concerning language learning (see Brown 2004; Davies & Elder 2004). More specifically, the present article deals with beliefs about language learning (see Horwitz 1987; Wesely 2012). One rationale within studies on learning beliefs among language learners is that beliefs affect learning and that it is beneficial for learning outcomes to be aware of pre-understandings, beliefs, expectations and goals among students (see Benson & Lor 1999; Cotterall 1999; Horwitz 1988; Mercer 2011; Mori 1999; Rifkin 2000; Wenden 1998, 1999).

The remit of this article does not allow a further discussion on the concept of belief. However, in this context I would describe it as socioculturally emerged

and dynamic metacognitive knowledge and/or a representational state of consciousness recognised by the individual (see Barcelos & Kalaja 2003; Mercer 2011; Negueruela-Azarola 2011; Wenden 1998, 1999; for more on representationalist theories of consciousness and on the connection between consciousness and intentionality, see Siewert 2011 and van Gulick 2014).

The students' answers concerning their thoughts on grammar are semiotic representations of beliefs in this sense. It is important to stress that expressed beliefs do not necessarily correlate with actual behaviour and they are obviously not static. Instead, they are dynamic entities that are affected but not determined by situational, personal and micro- as well as macrocontextual factors (see Barcelos & Kalaja 2011; Benson & Lor 1999; Negueruela-Azarola 2011; Rifkin 2000).

This observation is in line with the findings that expressed language attitudes do not always equal linguistic behaviour (Bainbridge 2001a, 2001b; Edwards 1985, 1994; Garrett et al. 2003; Giles & Billings 2004; Lewis 1981; Niedzielski & Preston 2003; Potter 1999; Potter & Edwards 2001; Potter & Wetherell 1987; Shotter 1993; Zanna & Rempel 1988). In other words, I do not assume a simple correlation between an expressed view on grammar and actual learning preferences or behaviour in language classes.

5. Grounds for classifications: prototypicality in answers

In this chapter I present a short metatheoretical basis for my categorisation of the views on grammar into four classes: *normative*, *functional*, *structural* and *other*. The *other* category consists of answers that could not easily be grouped under the three other headings. I also want to emphasise that I have placed the answers in the different categories according to the most salient aspects in the answers. A structural view on language and grammar can be found in most of the answers, but in some answers there seems to be a stronger emphasis on functionality and normativity. My categorisation is, in other words, based on the idea of prototypicality as it is outlined in prototype theory. I should stress here,

however, that I do not use prototype theory as an established method of analysis. Prototype theory in this context only describes how categorisation is possible in the first place.

Prototype theory (associated foremost with Eleanor Rosch) is based upon a model of ‘best examples’. Categories and general conceptions emerge from the fact that individual cases seem to have enough in common with a prototypical case. The prototype functions as an a priori model to which other cases are compared. The idea can be expressed as “a robin is more birdy than a guinea fowl” (Bolinger 1979: 404). Correspondences between instantiations and the prototype exist as a continuum. In other words, categories and concepts are not seen to be discrete entities. (For more see Gibbs 1994; Hampton 2006; Holme 2010; Hopper & Thompson 1985; Joseph 2002; McCloskey & Glucksberg 1978; Mervis & Rosch 1981; Rosch 1975, 1987, 1999; Winters 1990). Prototypes are conceived as abstractions in relation to concrete instantiations. The a priori and abstract nature of prototypes does not imply that they are autonomous in relation to human social life. Categorisations and classifications are influenced by biological, anthropocentric, cultural and contextual factors that are expressed, passed on and also transformed in language. This means that prototypes are changeable and negotiable (Brown 1990; Dupré 1981; Hampton 2006; Janicki 1990; McCloskey & Glucksberg 1978; Medin 1989; Rosch 1978, 1999; Wikforss 2009; see also Brown 1985). From the point of view of communication, the capability to generalise and the identification of sameness and categories seems to be a practical and even necessary condition (Medin & Atran 2004; for criticism of prototype theory, cf. Fodor 1998, Fodor & LePore 1994 and Margolis 1994).

My aim in this article is to use prototype theory only as a legitimisation for the possibility to identify sameness in the given answers, not to discuss the (dis) advantages of prototype theory. Since none of the answers are identical, I have organised them under the four headings according to the idea of prototypicality. In other words, I base my classification of the answers on prototypical formulations where one aspect seems to be salient. The vantage point is an interpretative one and I make no claims to know what the students actually intended by their answers.

6. Normative attitudes and the role of written language

Instead of *normative* I could have chosen *prescriptive* as a name for this category of attitudes towards grammar in language learning. Any language use is characterised by community-based norms which emerge in linguistic habits and behaviour. The community-based norms are not determinative (Figuerola 1994), but failing to act according to norms may lead to different sanctions or even ridicule. These kinds of norms could be called descriptive norms, as described by sociolinguists, and compared with pedagogical norms, which often reflect an idealised linguistic form (Bowerman 2006). The normatively flavoured comments given in the answers seem to reflect an attitude which could be identified as a prescriptivist one in which the idea of formal correctness is strong. The respondents most often use the word norm, however, and therefore the concept is used throughout.

Implicit or explicit normativity (in all senses) seem to have a long tradition in linguistics (and among laypeople), partly showing as the phenomena which Linell (1982, 2005a) describes as the “written language bias”. The bias means the tradition of looking at language and analysing it in its written form, which reproduces language as a visual, stabile, atomistic and regular entity. As a certain type of modality, written language has come to affect our views on language even if the prevailing paradigm within linguistics from the early 19th century onwards has promoted spoken language as ‘authentic language’ and therefore the primary form. The primacy of spoken language has also been motivated by both phylogenetic as well as ontogenetic reasons. Spoken language is, in other words, primary in human development on both a community and individual level. Language change also mostly happens in spoken language (Bucholtz 2003; Harris & Taylor 1989; Lillis 2013; Toolan 1996; Wilkins 1974). Nevertheless, there seems to have been a tendency to look at spoken language with the written form as a default.

In most formal language learning contexts, grammatical well-formedness seems to equal well-formedness according to the codified norms of written standardised

national languages. Obviously, the stability of the written modality also lends itself more easily to being the form focused on (for further discussion, see [Bittner 2011](#); [Bowerman 2006](#); [Davies 2006](#); [Linell 2001](#); [Wilkins 1974](#)). Language beliefs are in other words affected by political developments also manifested as language and educational ideologies as well as the general sociolinguistic situation in particular societies and communities ([Barcelos & Kalaja 2011](#); [Borg 2003](#); [Kelly 1969](#); [Rifkin 2000](#)). It is not surprising, then, that quite a few of the respondents (47 of 189) express some kind of normative attitude towards grammar and, at the same time, transmit an old tradition. Greek *grammatiké* is explicitly about understanding letters, which echoes the intimate relation between grammar and writing, and in ancient Rome classical writing became the ideal for other language uses as well ([Harris & Taylor 1989](#); [Hudson 2006](#))⁴. The later criteria for ‘good language’ codified by European Academies for their national languages were based on the literary canon, with an explicit distancing from spoken language use ([Edwards 1985](#); [Haarman 1995](#); [Lillis 2013](#); [Lo Bianco 2004](#); [Wilkins 1974](#)).

The respondents expressing normative views on grammar seem to think, importantly, that norms are about one single form of language, a belief which is understandable in the light of Western educational history and the role of written language in this history. In educational institutions and among the general public as well, the ideology of what ‘good language’ should be is strong and can be seen in a number of public contexts, such as in letters to the editor (see [Alho & Kauppinen 2008](#); [Davies 2006](#); [Harjunen & Korhonen 2008](#); [Svensson 1990](#); [Turner 1996](#); [Wilkins 1974](#)). Therefore it is not surprising that grammar is seen as normative for so-called proper language and this proper language is represented in written form.

Of all the answers received ($N = 189$), approximately 25% ($n = 47$) expressed a view on grammar as a set of normative rules for correct language use. In the

4. In the classical tradition of rhetoric and grammar instruction, however, oral and conversational skills were also important factors. These skills were exercised in natural situations and the idea of accommodation to specific contexts was emphasised. When Latin was taken out of the curriculum and mother tongue became an important subject, exercises in speech and conversation disappeared in many European schools for a long time and the status of writing grew even stronger (see [Johannesson 1992](#)).

following I present some examples of prototypical answers within this category (all translations from Finnish are by the author):

“Without grammar one cannot write or speak correctly”.

As indicated before many of the answers in this category included references to written language:

“Grammar includes the rules for correct writing and speaking. An important part of learning, but to learn how to speak is more important”.

“Grammar guides how language should be written/spoken in a correct way. An important part [in learning] but speech should be focused on more, like it is at the university”.

“The correct way of writing/talking, grammatical correctness, the correct way of forming sentences. More important in writing than in speech”.

The emphasis on written language might reflect awareness among university students of the demands for formal correctness in academic written genres. In the following answer, the use of *instruction* may express a more reflective attitude. This answer, nevertheless, voices a clear normative view:

“Grammar includes the instructions for how language should be used correctly. I think it has an important role because it is a prerequisite for good language use”.

Some of the normatively framed answers also reflected a purist view:

“The basic structure of language. Language as pure and grammatically correct”.

This formulation does not necessarily reflect a conscious purist ideology, but can also be interpreted as reflecting the idea of purity from norm-breaking. The following formulation can be said to echo a more conscious ideology:

“The grammatically correct form of language and the preservation of this”.

It seems that grammar also functions as a protection against unwanted changes. Some of the answers included explicit reference to normativity and also relativised the norms:

“Grammar is the official understanding of how a mother tongue should be written and how to use its structures”.

“Grammar equals the agreed upon rules and norms of language. Mostly these are shown in written language”.

In the latter answer the role of written language is again emphasised. The phrase *agreed upon* probably reflects the fact that the question of formal grammatical correctness (in one’s strongest language/languages) mostly occurs in connection with written language. All in all, the formulations expressing some kind of normative perspective on grammar include the idea of proper and less proper language. Approximately half of the normatively formed answers refer to written language in particular.

7. Functional perspectives

Functions in language, linguistic structure and/or language use can refer to different aspects. A classical grammatical function would be, for example, that a word functions as a subject or an object or that lexical and grammatical entities show functional interdependence (see [Martinet 1960](#); [Nichols 1984](#)).

A broader view of the functionality of all linguistic entities has been expressed by [Halliday \(1978: 19\)](#): “Language is as it is because of what it has to do”. The answers I have interpreted as expressing a functional view of grammar (22 of 189, 12%) reflect the idea of grammar as a functional tool for communication – it describes how to communicate in specific languages. This view comes close to the basic functionalist idea. Many of the answers emphasise grammar

as a practical tool for effective language *use*. Some of the formulations also express grammar as a resource in adapting language use to specific contexts and situations, echoing an idea of grammar as one factor of pragmatic, discourse and sociolinguistic competencies (see [Trappes-Lomax 2004](#)). If the normative view emphasised formal correctness, the functional perspectives seem to focus more on pragmatic communicative needs. In fact, it would have been possible to label this category of answers as *pragmatic perspectives*.

Although the word *functional* can have many dimensions and meanings, it was nevertheless possible to identify a category of answers representing a functional attitude towards grammar. Some of the answers seem to look upon grammar as a manual of practical language use designed for communicative purposes. The students with a more functional view of grammar also seem to be less worried about formal correctness, but adherence to formal norms can also fulfil the function of communicative needs. From this point of view, it is problematic to dichotomise between fluency and formal correctness. Depending on the context and situation, formal correctness can be what guarantees fluency.

In comparison to the normatively framed answers, the ‘functionalists’ do not specifically emphasise the role of grammar in written grammar. As mentioned, reoccurring terms include *use* and *language use*:

“Rules and instructions of language use for both spoken and written language. I feel that some kind of command of grammar fastens the learning of other areas in language”.

“Includes the rules for language use”.

The concept of rules is used in some formulations but, as noted, in connection to use. In some of the answers there were also references to contextual aspects:

“I think that grammar is the right way of using words, phrases and sentence structures according to the demands of the context”.

There might be a normative aspect in the use of the word *right* in this answer, but the mentioning of contextual appropriateness seems to imply a more functional view and less emphasis on one correct form. In the wording of the next answer, a kind of a meta-perspective can be identified:

“Knowledge on the structure and use of language which has an important role in the mastering of language, but practical language knowledge is affected by many other things (for example, mastering of the lexicon)”.

This answer reflects the idea that a reflexive competence supports a procedural one (see [Lehmann 2007](#)). Other formulations view grammar as a tool:

“Important from a communicative perspective but shouldn’t be emphasised too much. The function of language is to be an instrument for communication and expression, not an end in itself”.

Here, some important functions of language are mentioned and grammar is given some role in fulfilling these functions. Actually, the formulation is close to others used for pedagogical grammars. The final example of this category expresses a certain need for grammar:

“Without grammar one cannot know language or, in my mind, even use language”.

It is difficult to say what the students have meant by *use*, but it appears that the ‘functional’ answers view grammar more as something practical facilitating better language use.

Functional views seem to imply that autonomous grammars would not be a practical starting point for pedagogical grammar and for learning purposes in general but that structural aspects should be explained by or related to semantic, pragmatic, discourse and other external factors ([Croft 1995](#); [James](#)

1994; Mitchell 1994; Rutherford 1987; Tomlin 1994; Williams 2005). The functional views expressed in the replies seem to support the view of the usefulness of grammar in teaching and learning when it is used as a meaningful resource for communication and interaction and is compatible with usage-based functional and discourse-oriented views on language (see Chalker 1994; Glisan & Drescher 1993; Leech 1994; Tomlin 1994).

8. Structuralist attitudes

A vast majority of the answers (97 of 189) seemed to reflect some kind of structural view on grammar. *Structural* here means the role of grammar as a description of the structures in language. This view is common among non-linguists for, as Niedzielski and Preston (2003: 243) report, there exists a wide “concern...for linguistic structure in language learning”. Some of the answers emphasised the metalinguistic aspects of grammar, and others mentioned grammar as a descriptive tool and/or as a list of linguistic conventions. Some of the answers include normative and functional dimensions but the differences in emphasis were clear enough to motivate a separate category.

In the student answers, the term *structure* seems to be understood as a stable trunk onto which miscellaneous content is placed. Grammars try to generalise as much as possible and therefore structure may be conceived as an unchanging thing.

In the structurally framed answers, the relation between structure and use/instantiation are mostly left out, reflecting perhaps a more autonomous view of language. The question of written vs. spoken language also emerges in some of the structure-focused answers:

“Grammar is sentence structures. Grammar is the basis for writing”.

“Word order, inflection, verbs and nouns are an important basis, but one should emphasise speech more”.

As shown, some of the answer explicitly mentioned different structural aspects of language. Not all of the answers, however, make a distinction between writing and speech:

“It means the structure of language. It has a pretty important role because it structures writing and speaking”.

Many formulations include a similar idea of grammar as a basis for language. This way of thinking is often represented with different metaphorical expressions:

“Grammar is the basic structure of language which everything is based on”.

“Grammar is the foundation of language, on which one starts to build language”.

This idea of grammars as a foundation is, as can be seen, represented with a number of metaphorical expressions. Grammar as a tree is another commonly used metaphor:

“If language would be a tree, grammar would be its trunk and branches, and words are the leaves. In other words, the whole base for language teaching”.

Many of the answers in the structural category express a view on grammar as a separate but important aspect to which other things (e.g. words) are added. Some of the formulations even come close to a more linguistic, theoretical view:

“Describes the structure of language”.

“The theory of language, structure”.

“The trunk of language, the analytical part of language where strict regularities operate”.

The last formulation may not be the view of all linguists, and as Sapir (1921: 38) suggested, “all grammar leaks”. Some of the answers focus on learning:

“Grammar is learning of the structure of language. The basis for spoken and written language”.

“Grammar means learning of the structures and rule of language”.

These formulations seem understandable as grammar is most often used for language learning among non-linguists. The last example shows a more reflective and conscious view of grammar:

“Grammar includes the comprehension of sentence structures like predicates etc. and subordinate clauses”.

Many of the respondents also mention *rules*. However, the relation of these rules to language use is not commented on. Another type of question formulation would have yielded such answers, but the aim was, as previously mentioned, to keep the wording of the question fairly open. Answers given in this category do variously indicate how structure is understood and what it actually means to acquire linguistic structure. More light was shed on these issues in the comments concerning the role of grammar in learning, which is the subject of the next section.

9. The role of grammar in language teaching and learning

The latter part of the question concerning grammar in the questionnaire concerned the role of grammar in language teaching and learning. In many of the answers such adjectives as *important* and *central* were used when describing the role of grammar in teaching and learning. As could be expected, some of the respondents gave grammar a less central meaning in language studies. Some gave more detailed specifications regarding the parts of language in which grammar was considered to be especially important.

On the basis of how centrally grammar in language teaching and learning was considered to be by the respondents, I identified roughly four categories. The no-answer category represents answers which did not include a clear view on the matter in question. The distribution of the answers is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. The role of grammar in language teaching and learning

Role of grammar in language teaching and learning	No answer	Not very important	Fairly important	Very important
N =189	66	5	53	65
% ≈	35	3	28	34

It is worth pointing out that many answers explicitly mentioned *learning*. This means that the answers do not reflect only how much formal grammar is used by teachers. Not a single answer implied that grammar would not have any meaning whatsoever.

Over one half of the students (62%) expressed the view that grammar had a fairly or very important role in language studies. When grammar was given a fairly important role, the answers often included explanatory reservations of different sorts. These reservations included, for example, mentions of overemphasis of grammar and, typically, the lesser role played by grammar in learning to speak. The following prototypical answers reflect some of these different understandings. Some of the students have clearly experienced an overemphasis on grammar:

“To know grammar is fairly important, but without words it [grammar] is of no use, so it alone shouldn’t be emphasised too much”.

“Grammar should be learned in parallel with language use itself, not alone as such”.

“Yes, grammar is important, but it is more important to encourage one to use language. Grammar teaching should be made clearer”.

These formulations express an experience of grammar as something separate and not always integrated for interactional and communicative uses⁵. The first example also makes a distinction between lexis and grammar, which might be based on how these notions are, unfortunately, often presented as independent entities (see [Trappes-Lomax 2004](#)).

Some answers give explicit reference to the situation in Finland:

“An important part of language studies but in Finland the position of grammar is TOTALLY overemphasised; because people are afraid of making grammatical errors, they don’t dare to USE language, which for me is the function of language learning”.

“Important to know, but I think it is overemphasised in Finland. Especially in speech”.

These answers may reflect experiences from language teaching where formal correctness has been stressed at the expense of a more tolerant attitude. It is unfortunate, of course, if grammar teaching discourages people from using a specific language altogether. It is sometimes felt that too much emphasis is placed on details and communication should be focused on more:

“Without grammar it’s hard to make oneself understood, but when speaking a foreign language every comma doesn’t matter that much”.

“One should be encouraged to learn basic level grammar but otherwise the emphasis should be on encouraging communication”.

One could argue that speech also has its own forms of commas that serve to structure dialogues (e.g. different discourse markers and conversational conventions), that is, it too has grammatical features with semantic, pragmatic

5. I don’t know whether this also can be due to practices of orthodox “communicative language teaching” (for an historical overview see [Littlewood 2012](#)) where (formal) grammar not only was separated but also treated with some kind of suspicion or even hostility.

and interactional functions (see Auer 2007; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2001; Franck 1980; Fried & Östman 2005; Lindström 2008, 2014; Linell 2003, 2005b; Selting 2000; Weinert, Basterrechea & del Pilar García Mayo 2013). ‘Basic grammar’ is naturally important but within, for example, academic genres the demands for formal correctness may be greater or even essential. Even if styles, registers or lects other than the codified variant would do equally well as means of communication, it is not always a case where anything goes. To diverge from the norm is usually, at least for students, a risky endeavour, but, of course this does not imply that students should not be made aware of linguistic variation and the relative and ideological basis for standardised norms (see Canagarajah 2011; Celce-Murcia 1991; Davies 2006; Odlin 1994; Wilkins 1974; Ziegler 2011).

Students, of course, also have preconceived views on demands for accuracy depending on, among other things, the specific language to be learned, contexts of language use and beliefs about factors affecting setting of grades (see Chavez 2007). Sometimes students actually wish for more emphasis on formal correctness than teachers do (see Brown 2009; Ellis 2004; Horwitz 1988; Schulz 2001; Sharwood Smith 1988). As before, the difference between spoken and written language was mentioned in a number of answers:

“An important part of learning but to learn how to speak is more important”.

“An important part of knowing a language but it has overridden speaking and pronunciation in teaching”.

It is hard to say whether the second example represents some kind of naturalistic/communicative view on language learning or if the idea is that grammar simply matters less in speech. From a linguistic point of view, the latter seems to be wrong but maybe language teaching could also focus more on structural regularities specific to spoken language and in order to make it more dialogic and cooperative. The relation between metalinguistic grammatical knowledge and practical language use was seen to be problematic in some of the answers:

“The role is important but can’t be applied in practice (how many adults know/need the intransitive?)”.

Here the question of grammatical terminology also seems to be an issue. The case is, of course, that both children and adults ‘know’ the use of intransitive verbs in, for example, at least one language, but maybe the formulation is based on a feeling of disconnectedness between practical communication and grammar as it has been taught. The ability to apply a grammatical rule does not, of course, mean the ability to formulate the rule with metalinguistic terminology (Roehr 2007; cf. Borg 1999: 96-99 for different views on using terminology in language teaching).

The question of the role of grammar in mother tongue teaching and, on the other hand, foreign language teaching is also raised in some of the answers:

“Most important in mother tongue studies. Very much overemphasised in the teaching of foreign languages”.

This is a somewhat surprising formulation because, from the point of linguistics, everyone has a ‘complete grammar’ in their mother tongue (or their first/strongest/most used languages). The answer might be due to the fact that some of the courses in written communication in Finnish (as a mother tongue) at Finnish universities focus on formal grammatical correctness. Other respondents highlight the role of grammar in foreign language learning:

“An important role especially in foreign language studies, it is good to master the basics also in the mother tongue”.

“A very important role, one cannot make oneself understood in foreign languages otherwise”.

These answers may reflect the idea that grammar becomes prominent in a different way when studying foreign languages. The following statement may strike one as contradictory and/or reflecting a normative attitude:

“Without grammar one can’t know a language. On the other hand also mother tongue speakers make grammatical errors”.

Grammar is, in other words, a vital part of communicative competence, but mother tongue speech can also lack grammar. How an ‘error’ should be interpreted is uncertain but may be based on prescriptive principles. The views on grammar in language teaching and learning depend, of course, on many things, such as personal experiences and specific preferences of language learning. As mentioned, some of the students express unconditional support for grammar in language learning and teaching:

“An important part of teaching, perhaps there could be more of it”.

“The basis of high-quality language learning”.

“The role of grammar in language learning is very important”.

Those who valued grammar high in language studies often completed the answers with practically framed explanations:

“Mastering grammar helps one to know language comprehensively, for example understanding, speaking, writing”.

“It is important in language teaching and learning because otherwise one cannot use language in an understandable way”.

“Knowing grammar makes talking and writing more fluent”.

One may notice that these answers do not make a distinction between speech and writing. The majority of the answers mention *learning*, which was also mentioned in the question. A few answers only talked about *teaching*, which means that it is uncertain how grammar was valued as a learning tool:

“A central role in language teaching”.

“Very essential; ‘the Bible’ of language teaching”.

Nevertheless, my impression is that these types of answers reflect, at the least, an appreciative attitude towards grammar, although the Bible metaphor can be interpreted in many ways depending on one’s leanings. As previously stated, less positive opinions on grammar in language studies were also voiced:

“Its role in language teaching should be smaller. One cannot learn language only through grammar-based teaching (the use of communicative methods)”.

The answer seems to echo the idea that grammar would have a smaller role in ‘communicative methods’. From a linguistic point of view a ‘communicative’ approach does not imply a lesser role for grammar (Widdowson 1988), but the answer probably reflects the feeling of too much explicit focus on formal grammar. Some of the respondents felt that grammar might be important but that it is difficult and unpopular:

“Important, yes, but in general tedious and in school too much emphasis is put on it”.

“I associate “grammar” with the dull, numbing and dominating – although mandatory – side of language studies”.

The answers showing a negative attitude towards grammar might, nevertheless, see a point in practicing it (see Jean & Simard 2011). Teaching and learning do not have to be fun all the time, but the goal should be to present or use grammar in a way that seems relevant for learners and in ways which are connected to communicative and interactional needs. A couple of answers did assign grammar a fairly small role without any reservations, of which the following is one example:

“I don’t think the role is very big, you can learn grammar without its being taught”.

One can, of course, agree with this statement. The formulation seems to express the view that formal grammar teaching is not needed in language teaching, which is, depending on circumstances and resources, a fact. Taken together, then, grammar is given a fairly important role in language learning and teaching. Many respondents see grammar as an essential part of communication. Others experience grammar as potentially important but somehow as a separate entity. If this separateness is seen as a problem, one approach would be to relate the learning of grammatical constructions even more closely to communicative needs and situations.

10. Other views

As expected, some answers could not easily be placed in one of the categories presented above. These answers often included some aspects which imply, for example, a normative view, but not in a clear enough manner. Some respondents preferred to use the adjective *sensible* in their answers:

“A manual for constructing sensible sentences”.

“Enables a sensible use of the words of a language, including word order, use of tense”.

Sensible could possibly be read to mean *understandable*, thus equalling a practical and functional view. In the following formulations, the meaning of the word *technical* can also be interpreted in different ways:

“Technically correct writing/speech”.

“For me it [grammar] means the “technical” part of language and a basic tool kit and rules”.

Without going into deeper conceptual and philosophical issues on classical distinctions of knowledge such as *phronēsis*, *epistēmē* and *technē* (see [Bernstein](#)

1983), the last two formulations seem to reflect the idea of grammar as a description of suitable technical know-how about language use. *Technically correct*, on the other hand, also implies a normative component. Memorising is also mentioned in a few answers along with specific grammatical aspects:

“Mnemonics and word order in sentences”.

“Grammar is like a small jigsaw puzzle which one, little by little, learns (to remember) to assemble in a better way”.

In the following case the answer seems to express both a normative and descriptive view at the same time:

“Grammar is “rules” about how language should be used, or, actually, it tells how mother tongue speakers use language”.

The formulation is not contradictory, though, since formally codified prescriptive rules are ultimately derived from community-based language use.

11. Some final reflections

“Grammar is the heart of language, its role is important”.

On the basis of the answers presented in this article, Finnish university students seem to view grammar, if not as “the heart of language”, then at least as a fairly important aspect of language learning and teaching. Similar results have been reported in, for example, Schulz’s (2001) discussion of Colombian and American students. The views are in all likelihood also an expression of the fact that grammar has been such a self-evident part of language teaching.

My impression is, nevertheless, that the majority still genuinely feels that grammar offers genuine benefits for language learning and language use. To gain a better understanding of the thoughts and feelings behind these attitudes,

more qualitative methods should be used, such as interviews and ethnographic observation (see [Barcelos 2003](#); [Benson & Lor 1999](#); [Cotterall 1999](#)).

The attitudes towards grammar expressed among the majority of the students should receive a positive reception among teachers who feel that using grammar facilitates more effective language learning. Still, it seems that grammar needs a bit of demythologising and should be approached as just another semiotic resource for communication. If it is indeed the case that, as [Littlewood \(2004: 513\)](#) argues, there is “overwhelming evidence [...] that explicit focus on formal aspects of language is helpful and produces lasting improvement of performance”⁶, teachers must offer grammatical knowledge in a way which makes sense to as many learners as possible and to avoid presenting grammar as a separate abstraction with weak connections to pragmatic and interactional needs (see [Ellis 1994](#) for relations between individual learners and types of suitable instruction; see [Turula 2011](#) for learning styles and personality traits in relation to types of instruction). This practice can, of course, be carried out in many different ways ([Borg & Burns 2008](#); [Rutherford 1987](#); [Spada & Lightbown 2008](#)).

An open-minded and continuing dialogue between teachers and learners is recommended, but at the same time, teachers’ professional integrity must be preserved. This article is but a modest attempt to carry on with such a dialogue.

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6. See also [Batstone 1994](#); [Borg & Burns 2008](#); [Celce-Murcia 1991](#); [Ellis 1990, 2006](#); [Kachru 2010](#); [Master 1994](#); [Norris & Ortega 2000](#); [Odlin 1994](#); [Rutherford 1987](#); [Schmidt 1990](#); [Skehan 2006](#); [Taylor 2008](#); [Turula 2011](#); [Yip 1994](#).

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