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# *The role of grammar in EFL instruction: a study on secondary school students and teachers*

Relatore  
Prof. Fiona Clare Dalziel

Laureanda  
Giulia Pontarolo  
n° matr. 1018732 / LMLLA

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*Alla mia famiglia*



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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation presents a study on the role of grammar in English as a foreign language teaching in Italian schools. In particular, a research project including a questionnaire and a quasi-experimental study has been carried out. The questionnaire was administered to English teachers from an Italian and an English International school, in order to make a comparison between two different teaching contexts. On the other hand, the quasi-experimental study consisted in two task-based lessons, which were carried out with two small groups of students who have difficulties in learning a second language and who take part in extra English lessons after school.

The main aim of this study is to investigate the role of grammar instruction in EFL teaching, starting from teachers' attitude towards this issue and students' ability to adapt to innovative teaching methods, which offer a different treatment of formal instruction. The choice of the role of grammar as the topic of this study was determined by a personal interest in this issue, which has developed thanks to my collaboration in an activity offered to weak secondary school students, who are provided with extra lessons on the main school subjects, in order to make them fill their gaps in the knowledge of these subjects and achieve better proficiency. In particular, my work as English teacher in this activity, called *doposcuola*, has made me take a great interest in issues concerning foreign language teaching, such as the choice of the most suitable teaching method, the extent to which grammar has to be taught and its importance, and the reasons why some students have such difficulties in learning English. This is also the reason why the study focus on secondary school

teachers and students, as I had the opportunity to work with them during my work experience and my teacher training, which took place last year.

As has been said before, the study was carried out through the administration of a questionnaire to English teachers from two different schools. In particular, six teachers from the state secondary school in Cittadella (PD) and two teachers from the English International School in Rosà (VI) were questioned. Afterwards, the results were analyzed qualitatively, in order to draw some interesting conclusions about teachers' attitudes towards English language teaching and the role of grammar. Furthermore, I organized two task-based lessons with two groups of five and four students respectively who take part in my English lessons after school. In particular, they carried out a communicative task based on listening comprehension and spoken production, and then performed some form-focused activities. The lessons have been described and analyzed in this dissertation in order to investigate whether students with low language proficiency are able to carry out tasks and to focus on grammar structures while they are doing so, in order to acquire them.

The present dissertation is divided in three parts. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to foreign language teaching and learning, in which the characteristics and difficulties of these activities are described. Moreover, it contains an overview of the theories about second language acquisition from the 1950s to present days, which provides the study with a theoretical background. Chapter 2 investigates the role of grammar in EFL teaching, presenting the debate about this issue and its main tendencies, that is to say focus on forms, focus on meaning and the possible solution of focus on form. Then, task-based learning is presented as a valid method to apply to focus on form. Finally, in chapter 3 the research project is presented: the

methodologies, data, and results of the questionnaires and the task-based lessons are described in order to provide the study with evidence.

It is important to underline that this study has some limits, as it is based on a small sample and analyzes phenomena which take place in a limited teaching context. However, it aims at being a modest contribution to research in the field of foreign language teaching and grammar instruction, which might be useful for those people who are approaching the teaching profession for the first time, or for experienced teachers, who have to deal with different problems and dynamics, which are different from those of ten or twenty years ago.





# CHAPTER 1

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

### 1.1 Teaching a second or foreign language

Foreign language teaching is an interesting and complex issue, as it involves linguistics, psychology, pedagogy and a certain degree of personal experience. The description of language teaching as both an art and a science proposed by Prator (1991) explains perfectly the complexity of the subject. This can be considered an art because it relies on teachers' personal experience and abilities, and thus the element of human nature plays an important role in it. At the same time, language teaching can assume a scientific connotation, since it must be based on certain and durable facts to be developed and then taught. This dichotomy is the basis of the main problem that all the teachers have to face: it is impossible to identify the best method to teach a foreign language. In his article on teaching methods, Prabhu (1990) tries to explain this impossibility. He points out that the opinion that there is no best method to teach a foreign language is a popular one, but it is often used as a means to excuse the incapability to find a solution in the research of valid teaching methods. Moreover, Prabhu (1990) describes three possible reasons for this problem. One is the claim that different methods are best for different teaching contexts; this means that there is no method that can be suitable for everyone and that many variables, such as social context, and factors regarding teachers or learners, should be considered. However, this implies that the search for the best method for each

teaching situation should be carried out. On the other hand, a plausible reason can be that each method is partially valid and has some truth in it. This assertion could endorse the practice of eclecticism in language teaching, but it does not help in looking for the best method, because it does not reveal which part of each approach is valid, and thus which characteristics should be considered to find other similar methods to mix in an eclectic approach (Prabhu, 1990). The third case proposed by Prabhu (1990) is the distortion of the notion of “good” or “bad” method itself. In fact, the best method is considered as the one that leads to the best results in terms of ‘learning outcomes’. This kind of evaluation is based on the belief that a method has something in itself that makes it better than the others, and that the best way to make it useful to everyone is to apply it mechanically. On the contrary, a method should be seen as a ‘high developed and [...] articulated sense of plausibility’, which is influenced by teacher’s understanding of teaching and their involvement in this activity, and which materializes in a teaching approach that is open to change (Prabhu, 1990).

As a consequence of the difficulties described above, the literature on language teaching and language acquisition proposes a great variety of different methods that are presented to the reader as the best to teach a foreign language successfully. However, none of these approaches has been proved to be actually better than the others and teachers have had to deal with different theories and methods that change continually. Any method has indeed a first stage, in which the hypotheses that support it are accepted and a deep change in methodologies is required; on the other hand, a second stage in which theories are criticized is always reached. As a consequence, teachers start modifying the materials they have at their disposal on the

basis of their learners' level and needs and they stop relying completely on the new method.

The frequent changes in the methodological approaches are due both to external factors, which can be cultural, social or political, and internal ones, such as the development of research on language teaching. In Italy, the former is represented for instance by the changes in the composition of the classes due to the arrival of a great number of foreign students or by the renewal of the school system in order to adapt it to European Union directives. In fact, there was great variety in the tendencies regarding foreign language teaching from 1950s to 1990s in Italy; the focus of the theories switched during those forty years from the description of the elements of the foreign language that had to be learnt to the description of the communicative competence that learners had to acquire, and then to the description of the different learner profiles. Later in the 1990s there was a radical change in how the learner and the classroom environment were perceived: the students became the centre of attention and the teaching activity aimed mainly to make learners acquire the competence to interact with other speakers. Moreover, learners stopped being considered as containers that had to be filled with knowledge, and they became the focus of the educational process together with their needs and interests. This shift was brought about primarily by social constructivism, which is based on the idea of knowledge as being built by participants through activities in which a goal should be reached, and of learning as a dynamic system of 'sociocultural resources' that are linked to their social and historical context (Yüskel, 2009). As a consequence, social constructivism advocates a change in the perception of the role of teacher in the learning process (Gergen, 1995). In particular, the teacher should be a sort of guide,

who facilitates and coordinates learners' work; moreover, teachers should not organize their agenda *a priori*, but learners should have an active role in determining the direction and the goals of the learning process. In addition, students are seen as the subject of teaching instead of its object; the aim is not to fill their mind with knowledge, but to make them participate in acquiring it. In particular, this goal can be achieved through 'collaborative learning', in which the main educational role is the continual exchange of knowledge between teacher and students (Gergen, 1995). In Italy, the different view of teachers' and learners' roles in the learning process developed thanks to the formulation of the *Dieci tesi per l'educazione linguistica democratica* (1975), a document about language pedagogy that stated that the teaching activity should base itself on learners' level to formulate its goals and methods. As regards the present, attention is focused on the realization of multilinguistic education, in order to allow students to become real European citizens, developing an intercultural communicative competence. In fact, the European Union demands that every citizen knows three languages, including their mother tongue and two European foreign languages. According to Ciliberti (2012), this can be achieved through a differentiated and complex study programme, which includes different aims, such as the use of technology to learn languages, an unfocused acquisition of L2, the creation of a differentiated linguistic competence, the development of learner autonomy and of intercultural education. In particular, technological devices can aid the learning of a foreign language in classroom and allow learners to create their individual paths of acquisition. Moreover, unfocused acquisition takes place in contexts of spontaneous acquisition, for example when school subjects are taught in a foreign language, as in CLIL (Content Language

Integrated Learning) projects (see for example Ruiz de Zarobe, 2011 and Gustafsson et al., 2011). On the other hand, the development of differentiated linguistic competence aims to improve different abilities and to achieve different stages of competence for each foreign language studied. What is more, learner autonomy is necessary in order to make students aware of their role and of their abilities. To sum up, a multilinguistic education is necessary, which should have linguistic, cultural and cognitive goals at the same time and should consist of different activities, which integrate, rather than substitute, institutional foreign language learning, such as lessons by a native speaker teacher, staying abroad, CLIL projects, and self-learning (Ciliberti, 2012).

Another problem of the methodologies proposed so far is that they have been too ‘narrowly-based’ (Prator, 1991), that is to say that they have been too specific and closed to different interpretations. In fact, each method of the past has been based on one specific discipline, such as psychology, social sciences, semantics, logic, or linguistics. On the contrary, a teaching style that is both flexible and scientific must have ‘more than one cornerstone’ (Prator, 1991). According to Prator, these cornerstones should be the nature of language and what is known about it, the nature of the learner, and the aims of instruction. The disciplines that can account for these needs are linguistics, which analyzes the structure of language, and psychology, which allows one to distinguish scientific facts from beliefs about learners’ needs. The aims of instruction are not determined by a specific science; however, they are of great importance, as they influence the choice of the materials and the techniques to use. For this reason, they should be based on learners’ needs (Prator, 1991).

Furthermore, the flexible nature of the ideal teaching style mentioned above is well explained by Widdowson (1979), who states the need for teachers to adopt more than one approach simultaneously, choosing a set of principles that allow them to adapt the various approaches to the different teaching situations they have to deal with. On the other hand, Widdowson (1984) warns that this practice of exploiting general principles from different theoretical approaches, called 'eclecticism', can be useful and proficient only when it is based on theory. Silvell (1986) restates this concept arguing that the term eclectic can acquire the meaning of 'haphazard' when teachers follow common sense instead of 'serious thought about the rationale'. In Silvell's opinion, eclecticism should be based on an 'informed' common sense together with critical judgment, which derives from teachers' personal experience, in order to avoid the practice of picking up 'a little of everything' without making any clear decision.

To sum up, it is clear that the research into the best method to teach a foreign language is not only difficult, but according to Ciliberti (2012) it is even impossible, and teachers have to adopt the solution of a mixed method, which considers the teaching and learning situation in which they operate. However, knowledge of the different theories on language acquisition is important because it allows teachers to be aware of the possibilities they have in the organization of their work and to decide whether these are relevant for their students. For this reason, a description of the main theories from 1950s to the present days will follow in this chapter.

Before passing to the description of what learning a foreign language means, it is necessary to clarify the terminology used in the field of language teaching. Usually a distinction is made between teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) or as a

second language (TESL). In particular, the second language can be considered the one that is taught in a setting in which it is regularly used by the community. On the contrary, a foreign language is taught to the learners but it is not spoken outside the classroom; this is the case we are concerned with, as English is taught in Italian primary and secondary schools as a foreign language, one that is not spoken by the community in which the learners live. However, second and foreign language are actually two poles of a continuum and the underlying process of acquisition is the same; for this reason, they will be used without distinction in this dissertation.

## **1.2 Learning a foreign language**

A fundamental premise in order to analyze the language learning process is that there is not only one way to learn a foreign language and become proficient in it. In particular, De Marco and Wetter (2000) distinguish three kinds of learning and describe the first as naturalistic second language acquisition. In this case, the language is learnt in real communicative situations, and thus learners receive realistic input from several native speakers, as they are integrated in a context in which the foreign language is spoken by ordinary people, and focus attention on the communicative aspects of the language; for this kind of acquisition to take place, the learner's motivation and need to communicate with other people are fundamental. A second kind of learning is instructed acquisition, which takes place at school and often involves a deductive process of acquisition and the systematic analysis of the language; in this case, the input that is offered to the student may not be realistic in some cases and the aim of instruction is mainly to teach rules and avoid errors, while the learners' motivation is usually to get a good mark, rather than to learn the



language proficiently. This kind of learning is the one that will be dealt with in the study conducted within this work, which will analyze the teaching of English as a foreign language in the classroom. Finally, the authors indicate mixed acquisition as a third style of learning, in which natural and instructed acquisition coexist; this should increase the motivation of the learner, who acquires the language in order to be able to use it outside the classroom. Obviously, the distinction between these three ways of learning is not a clear-cut division, but often a mixed kind of learning is achieved: for example, in a setting of instructed acquisition, communicative activities can be carried out in order to allow a certain degree of natural acquisition.

Moreover, De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2005) describe learning as a process of ‘assimilation and accommodation’, starting from Piaget’s theory of the periods of children’s mental development, which describes assimilation as the connection of new information with old information that is in the individual’s mind, and accommodation as the strengthening of this connection to remember the information. They explain how new linguistic information is noticed by the learner, and then linked to the existing information and finally established in the mental language system. Consequently, they state that the optimal condition to learn is the presence of enough old information (language knowledge) to be linked and enough new information (input) to be assimilated.

Noticing is a fundamental concept in second language acquisition. As Schmidt (1990) explains, it is a necessary condition for learning to take place, as it allows input to be transformed into intake. In particular, noticing is described by Schmidt (1990) as the fact of being aware of something, of paying attention to the stimuli received and making a subjective experience of them. Thus, noticing is more than

mere perception, which consists in the ability to represent external events mentally. The importance of noticing in language acquisition has been proved by some studies, which demonstrated that many of the forms that are noticed by the learner in the input received are then used in spoken or written production (Schmidt, 1990). Moreover, some important factors that influence noticing are listed by Schmidt (1990). The most significant are: learner's expectations due to the knowledge of the foreign language, to the L1 background or to L2 instruction; the frequency and salience of linguistic structures in input; and task demands, which make learners focus their attention to specific forms. In addition, it is important to consider that learners themselves can voluntarily draw their attention to some linguistic features rather than others, and thus they consciously influence the practice of noticing.

So far the term acquisition has been used to describe language learning; in particular, second language acquisition (usually abbreviated as SLA) describes how a language is learnt. De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2005) underline its dynamic aspect; they affirm that language knowledge cannot be stable at any moment, because it is continually developing while it is used. Some different stages have been noticed in the process of language acquisition: in particular, learners always start from the comprehension of language structures, and then pass through a phase of irregular production until they reach the correct formulation of utterances in the foreign language. Furthermore, some important studies on interlanguage<sup>1</sup> have shown that learners follow a precise acquisitional sequence; in fact, morphosyntactic structures are acquired in a precise order, in which the learning of a structure implies the acquisition of the preceding one. For example, it has been noticed that in acquiring

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<sup>1</sup> The precise meaning of this term will be explained in the next section of the chapter, where theories on second language acquisition will be analyzed.

the interrogative form, most learners pass through the same stages: first they use intonation to make questions, then they start using some simple auxiliaries like the verb “can”, subsequently they learn to use the inversion of subject and verb and finally they acquire the auxiliary “do”.

Even if some similarities between the way learners acquire a foreign language can be found and also proved with clear evidence, second language acquisition is not a uniform phenomenon; on the contrary, it is influenced by factors regarding learners, the learning situation and the interaction between them. In fact, the variables that have a great impact on language acquisition are interdependent and this is why it is impossible to describe the results of the different kinds of learning described above with precision and, supposing that it can be useful, to state which is the most successful.

First of all, language variables can affect acquisition. Chini (2000) lists some characteristics of the foreign language that can influence the process of learning; for example, the principles of naturalness and transparency of the structures make them easily learnable, and the principle of markedness renders an element less frequent and less natural, making it more difficult to acquire. In addition, the relationship between the first and second language is important, depending on the kind of transfer that occurs. In fact, in positive transfer the knowledge of a language can help in the acquisition of the other; on the contrary, in negative transfer the knowledge of the first language limits the formulation of new hypotheses in the foreign one. Furthermore, Diadori (2011) adds that the similarity between the two languages has an important role; when the foreign language has some features in common with the first one, the learner is required to learn many new words, but they does not have to

acquire new concepts, as they can exploit those of their first language. On the other hand, the L1 and L2 can present many substantial differences, such as the acquisition sequence, the kind of input offered to the learner, the time they have at disposition to acquire the language, the age at which they start learning it, the learner's motivation and culture. All these factors can actually limit the acquisition of the foreign language. Moreover, an effect on the second language can also be caused by other languages, as multilingualism is by now a widespread condition (Diadori, 2011).

Second, an important role is played by environment variables, such as the learning context, which changes in accordance to what kind of learning takes place, or the social context, when it offers interaction with native speakers outside the classroom. Furthermore, input and interaction in the foreign language are fundamental to determine language acquisition (Diadori, 2011): learners imitate input and exploit it in order to make hypotheses on the foreign language, while interaction is useful to train communicative abilities and the negotiation of meaning. Finally, time organization has a great influence on SLA, as the foreign language is learnt in specific lapses of time that must be organized in the best way, alternating instruction and exposure to the language to create the best environment for acquisition.

Third, individual variables have been considered of great importance in the process of language acquisition. Factors such as age, sex, motivation, affective factors like anxiety or self-confidence, personality, personal relationships and the perception of the foreign language have great weight in determining the learning process. As my personal study analyzed in chapter 3 focuses on students aged 10 – 14, the age factor will be dealt with in greater depth here in order to provide the necessary background to my work.

As regards age, the most popular and widespread belief is that children learn more easily than adults. This statement derives from Lenneberg's hypothesis about the presence of critical periods in the process of acquisition of a language. This theory states that the acquisition of language is linked to a process called lateralization, through which the brain concentrates on the accomplishment of some specific functions (Villarini, 2000; De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2005): in particular, the neurological ability to understand and produce language is concentrated in the left hemisphere of the brain, while before lateralization it involved both the left and the right hemisphere (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, the brain loses its plasticity and, according to De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2005), after the process of maturation, it will not be able to absorb any new language system. Lenneberg calls the completion of the process of lateralization critical period. It comes at about 10 years old and before it the language is acquired quite naturally; this should be the reason why children acquire languages more easily. However, there is clear evidence for an easier acquisition by children only as regards pronunciation. Therefore, it has been hypothesized that more than one critical period occurs in the life of a learner because each linguistic skill has its own critical stage; this could be the proof that the process of lateralization is gradual and thus different aspects of the foreign language are concerned at different stages. This could be why adolescents are more proficient in learning grammar, as the critical period for this aspect of language is thought to be at about 16 years old (Villarini, 2000; Diadori, 2011).

On the other hand, De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2005) question the existence of the critical periods. They affirm that, even if there is evidence that learners who start late to study a new language never reach 'native-like proficiency' (De Bot, Lowie,

Verspoor, 2005), the difference with younger learners can be explained through many factors, such as the longer amount of time and exposure to the foreign language the latter have at their disposal, or the interaction of other individual variables cited above. Moreover, they consider it quite impossible to demonstrate the moment at which a critical period starts or ends in a precise way.

However, age influences the rate and success of second language acquisition: as has already been said, younger learners are better at pronunciation, while adolescents progress more rapidly in the sequence of acquisition; however, they are likely to be surpassed in the end by young learners, who have more opportunities to reach native-like proficiency. These differences are explained by Ellis (1985) through the importance of meta-awareness. According to Ellis, young learners are exposed to automatic language acquisition. This means that they lack meta-awareness, that is to say, they do not acquire the language consciously; moreover, they are 'self-centered' and see only similarities between languages. In addition, they are open to languages because they have no social attitude toward foreign languages. On the contrary, older learners are able to understand the language and analyze it as a formal system, thanks to a higher degree of meta-awareness. Ellis bases himself on Piaget's theory of the period of the Formal Operations, which corresponds to the development of the ability to make hypotheses and use a deductive approach in pre-adolescents, to explain how children from the age of 12 develop meta-awareness and some social attitudes towards the foreign language. According to Ellis (1985), this happens because the child has reached the final stage of their cognitive development and thus the origin of their abstract thinking.

If age is an important individual variable in the process of SLA, input also plays a fundamental role in it. This aspect of language learning has been seen in some different ways, according to the theories on language acquisition that dominated in one period or another. For instance, behaviourist theorists, who considered the learner as a producer of language, thought that input could exist only in the form of stimuli and feedback to be provided to the learner. On the other hand, nativist theories described the function of input as that of activating learners' internal mechanisms of acquisition of the language, excluding the possibility that output can be in part the result of the characteristics of input. Finally, interactionist approaches admitted that input determines but is also determined by the learner's processing mechanisms and that acquisition derives from interaction between students' knowledge and the linguistic environment (Ellis, 1985).

However, it has been proved in several ways that input can facilitate language acquisition, for example by providing the learner with expressions they can memorize and then use, or allowing them to build vertical constructions, that is to say utterances created by the learner using expressions from the words of the interlocutor. Moreover, the rate of SLA is influenced both by the quantity and the quality of input received: for example, a language setting must have some characteristics to make the transformation of input in intake possible. There must be a high quantity of input and the learner should feel the need to communicate. Moreover, language should be used to perform different functions and there should be opportunities for uninhibited production. However, if we compare these aspects with a typical classroom setting, we can easily notice that it is quite difficult to find all of them. In fact, interaction in the classroom may not correspond to actual

communication that takes place in the real world. For example, the features of the foreign language that should be acquired by learners are made frequent and salient in the input, so that they become more noticeable and learnable. Moreover, students might not be motivated enough to speak in classroom, if the conversation in which they should take part does not deal with topics that are important for them and thus they do not feel a real need to communicate; finally, sometimes teacher talk dominates the entire lesson of the L2, limiting the opportunities for interaction between students. On the contrary, Ellis (1997) points out that foreign language instruction that aims to encourage communication should provide learners with a kind of input that is not manipulated in order to focus on language structures. On the contrary, only those modifications that allow ‘partially proficient learners’ to understand input should be applied; these are for instance simplification of the utterances and redundancy. As a consequence, input should be grammatically correct, but easy to comprehend. In this way, it can aid the natural development of the foreign language. To sum up, input in a classroom setting should consider the learner’s needs and their developmental stage of the foreign language, so as to be relevant and comprehensible at the same time.

As well as the factors that can affect SLA, another issue worth mentioning in the discussion on foreign language learning are the acquisition strategies that learners can put into practice. These allow the learner to formulate hypotheses on the structure of the foreign language and then build new rules in their interlanguage. Some important strategies cited by Chini (2000) are transfer from the first language, or the process through which a rule is applied to cases to which it is not suitable



because of extended analogy, for example when the suffix “-ed” is added to irregular verbs (play, played; drink, drank).

### **1.3 Theories about second language acquisition**

Since the middle of the last century many theories on SLA have been formulated in order to explain facts about language learning and to create hypotheses and predictions. In particular, starting from the failure of the contrastive theories that dominated the scene in the 1950s, the definition of the learner as a creator of rules became widespread, thanks in particular to Chomsky’s theories on Universal Grammar, until the 1970s, when the definition of interlanguage was created. As knowledge of the theoretical bases of language learning is fundamental to make accurate decisions about foreign language teaching, a survey of the main approaches from the 1950s to the present day will follow, focusing on the theories that most have influenced the work of L2 teachers and SLA researchers.

In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, behaviourist theories defined foreign language acquisition as a process of formation of habits, which are different from those regarding the first language, through imitation, memorization, practice and a systematic comparison with the L1, which highlights differences and similarities between the two languages (Ciliberti, 2012). Thus, these theories were based on contrastive analysis, that is to say the comparison of L1 and L2 structures in order to understand which habits of the first language can influence the learning of a foreign one. The main aim of the analysis was to predict errors in order to avoid them; in fact, negative transfer from the first language was seen as the only cause of mistakes. Thus, learning of a foreign language was considered to be the product of teaching, which was to be structured on

the basis of the findings of contrastive analysis. However, these theories were strongly criticized in the 1970s, because they were considered to be dated and incapable of producing acceptable results. In fact, it was proved that errors were not always linked to the influence of the first language and, moreover, some mistakes that were described as predictable did not occur in all cases (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005; Ciliberti, 2012).

When contrastive analysis was abandoned because of its shortcomings, a variety of diverse theories were proposed, focusing on many different aspects of language learning. Chini (2000) distinguishes three kinds of theories: nativist, environmentalist and cognitive theories.

The nativist approach developed in the 1970s and based itself on Chomsky's theories of language acquisition. He believed that the acquisition of the first language is not the result of a set of habits, but a process of elaboration of rules through the creation of hypotheses and their testing; this can also be applied to foreign language acquisition because people possess a Language Acquisition Device, that is an inbuilt mechanism of acquisition that contains the language principles that are common to all languages and limits the possible structures of L2 (Ciliberti, 2012). Moreover, Chomsky opposed the behaviourist model stating that language cannot be explained through the sole analysis of observable facts, but it is also necessary to consider those data that cannot be observed, that is to say that the speaker 'competence' must be investigated (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005). This corresponds to Saussure's concept of *langue*, that is the general patterns of a language, its theoretical system.

Among nativist theories, the Monitor Theory by Krashen was one of the most influential and it gave rise to the development of communicative approaches and

SLA research in general (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005). The theory was formulated in the 1970s and 1980s and based itself on the idea that people can learn a foreign language by being exposed to ‘meaningful input and communication’, and not merely through formal instruction (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005). Krashen’s theory consists of five hypotheses, the first of which is the Acquisition versus Learning Hypothesis. Krashen (1982) explains that learning is the result of formal language teaching and produces conscious knowledge about the language, while acquisition is a subconscious process that does not involve meta-knowledge, and that allows adults to access the same Language Acquisition Device as children learning their first language.

The Natural Order Hypotheses describes how grammar structures are learned in a natural and predictable order, that is independent from external factors like age, input or the first language. Evidence is provided by the fact that learners make very similar errors during the process of acquiring a foreign language, that are called developmental errors.

Moreover, through the Monitor Hypothesis Krashen asserts that the ‘learning system’ (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005) has the role of monitor in the learner’s mind, in the sense that it can help planning, editing and correcting the speech in the foreign language. However, this can happen only if the learner has enough time to produce an utterance, the capability to focus on the form and the knowledge of the rules involved in the production; on the contrary, it is impossible to use linguistic learned knowledge consciously when the learner is speaking naturally.

The Input Hypothesis demonstrates that learners can proceed along the natural order of acquisition only if they receive a kind of input that is comprehensible but also

‘i+1’ (Krashen, 1982), that is to say a step beyond the stage of linguistic competence the learner has already reached. As learners in a classroom, for example, are always at different stages of competence, the best input to provide is, in Krashen’s opinion, natural communicative input, in which every learner will always find some input that is suitable to his/her linguistic competence.

Finally, it is stated in the Affective Filter Hypothesis that some affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence and a low degree of anxiety can help language acquisition, while their opposites raise an affective filter, which creates a mental block and prevents the learner from using comprehensible input for acquisition, as it obstructs the delivery of input to the Language Acquisition Device. Krashen’s model found its practical application in the Natural Approach, which will be described in the next chapter, and other teaching methods that were suitable to the institutional teaching of a foreign language, in particular to adults. On the other hand, it has been criticized because it ignores the intermediate stages of the process of acquisition and the effects of L2 instruction (Chini, 2000). Moreover, it does not consider the important role of meta-linguistic reflection and, according to Ciliberti (2012), it makes too clear-cut a distinction between acquisition and learning, while they are likely to be two interdependent processes. This is demonstrated, for example, by the interface position<sup>2</sup> (Ellis, 1997), which accepts the interdependence of implicit and explicit knowledge, taking position against Krashen’s view of separate processes.

Another theory on acquisition as a process of parameter setting was formulated starting from Chomsky’s concept of Universal Grammar. This is a set of general principles that can be applied to any language and are innate in human mind; this is

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<sup>2</sup> This position will be explained in greater details in the section of this chapter in which theories based on the difference between implicit and explicit knowledge are described.

proved by the way children learn their mothers' language. Universal Grammar allows the learner to set parameters depending on the characteristics of the language found in the input received; this is true for first language learning, but it has also been taken into consideration for L2 acquisition, in which parameters must be set again in a different way from L1 ones. It follows that language features that correspond to linguistic universals, which are innate, should be learnt easier and earlier. However, some problems come to the surface with this theory (Ellis, 1985). For example, Chomsky (1965) asserted the impossibility for children to learn the L1 only from the input offered by their parents, as that input is not rich enough to provide the child with adequate data to set the parameters of a language; the same idea is valid for the learner acquiring a foreign language, and it is brought by Chomsky as evidence for the existence of Universal Grammar. However, it has been shown to be unfounded. In fact, it has been demonstrated by nativist theorists that learners of a L2 are able to discover the characteristics of the foreign language, regardless of the impoverishment of the input received (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, linguistic universals are considered as innate by Chomsky, but there are other explanations for their nature, which seem to be as valid as Chomsky's. In Halliday's opinion, for example, the 'potential to communicate' (Ellis, 1985) is innate, while universals are manifestations of the kinds of use we make of language.

Finally, Dulay and Burt developed a nativist theory that assumed the correspondence between first and foreign language, focusing in particular on grammar acquisition (Ciliberti, 2012). In their opinion, the acquisition of a foreign language is identical to that of the first language and learners go through the same acquisitional stages, while external factors do not influence L2 acquisition. On one hand, longitudinal studies

have given evidence for the similarity between L1 and L2 orders of acquisition, as they imply the same competence; on the other hand, substantial differences between the first and the foreign language always exist and they cannot be ignored, while this theory seems to do that (Ellis, 1985).

If nativist theories focused on the innate mechanisms of acquisition exploited by the learner, the environmentalist approach concentrates on external factors, such as social and cultural aspects or the characteristics of the input. In particular, some sociocultural theories that consider foreign language acquisition as a social practice have been formulated. These state that teachers should abandon the idea of the classroom as a learning setting in which knowledge is transferred to students; on the contrary, they have to encourage group work and interaction, which stimulate acquisition. Moreover, these theories underline the importance for the learner to understand the target culture, in order to appreciate language learning.

The acculturation model by Schumann (Chini, 2000), for instance, sees foreign language learning as a process of acculturation: the greater the social and psychological distance between the learner and the target language culture, the less the proficiency of the learner; on the contrary, less detachment from the foreign culture means more exposure to input and thus a better development of the target language. The weak point of this theory is first of all the impossibility to apply it to the institutional learning of the foreign language, in which naturalistic language acquisition is unlikely to take place. Moreover, it does not explain how language is internalized and does not give clear evidence for the connection between acquisition and socio-psychological factors. These are described in detail by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991). Social factors are, for instance, the social dominance of the

learner's group in the target community; integration patterns, which vary from preservation of one's identity to assimilation; cohesiveness and cultural congruence of the learner's social group; attitude towards the target community, which can be neutral or hostile; and the time the learner's social group intends to spend in the foreign country. In addition, the individual psychological factors that influence social distance, and thus SLA, are language and culture shock, motivation and ego permeability.

The accommodation theory by Giles (Ellis, 1985) adds the factor of motivation to the social distance with the target language community, explaining the variability in the learner's language with the attempt to 'accentuate or reduce' social differences. In other words, the more the learner is motivated to integrate in the local community that speaks the foreign language, the more he/she will be proficient in the acquisition of that language. This is a consequence of how the learner's group 'defines itself in relation with' the L2 community (Ellis, 1985). However, this theory refers to the use of foreign language in multilingual community and thus is not suitable to the classroom teaching context.

Similar to environmental theories, the interactionist approach has had a great impact on SLA research. In fact, this approach to language learning has turned out to be more powerful than the previous ones, as it refers both to innate and environmental factors to explain language acquisition. First of all, the interactionist approach highlighted the importance not only of the input received, but also of interaction, which helps the learner in the communicative production. In particular, Hatch's Discourse Theory explains that the rate and path of foreign language acquisition are strongly influenced by the strategies used in conversation by the learner in order to

‘negotiate meaning’ (Ellis, 1985). However, it has been demonstrated that this theory wasn’t able to prove that interaction in the foreign language is the necessary and sufficient condition to language acquisition. Furthermore, the Variable Competence Model by Ellis tried to show that language acquisition depends on language use and that the way a foreign language is learnt reveals how it is used. According to Ellis, the development of SLA depends on the acquisition of new rules, which can occur only by taking part in conversations that involve different kinds of discourse.

The third approach to language acquisition analyzed by Ciliberti (2012) is represented by cognitive theories, which focus on mental processes and acquisition mechanisms; their premise is that language learning is similar to the learning of other types of knowledge, thus it involves strategies and operations that are not specific of language acquisition.

The most important cognitive theories developed in the 1970s are those based on the evolution of *interlanguage*. This term was first used by Selinker (Ellis, 1985) in 1972 and it describes a series of interconnected systems created by the learner that form their built-in syllabus. These theories claim that the approximate systems of the first language are different from those of the foreign one; that these systems build an ‘evolving series’ (Ellis, 1985); and that when learners’ approximate systems at the same stage of development come in contact, they relatively coincide. Moreover, the process of learning is considered as a continuum that involves continual restructuring of the learner’s internal system. McLaughlin (1990) points out that the process of restructuring also involves children learning their first language and it occurs when qualitative changes intervene in the development of language knowledge; each of these changes allows the learner to reach a new stage, which represents a new



‘internal organisation’ of information (McLaughlin, 1990). As regards second language acquisition, restructuring is described as a ‘transitional shift’ that exists between two following stages in the process of ‘form-function mappings’ and it consists in two different phases (McLaughlin, 1990). In the first phase, learners proceed along the interlanguage continuum formulating hypotheses about the transformations that are needed to convert their innate knowledge into the L2 forms they find in the input received (Ellis, 1985). At this stage, different linguistic forms (both correct and incorrect) are used by the learner simultaneously. Then in a second phase redundant forms are eliminated if they do not correspond to different functions (McLaughlin, 1990). To do this, learners test their hypotheses through various strategies, for example making errors. These are considered as part of the learning process, as the practical contribution of the learner to acquisition, and not as the evidence that learning has not taken place, as contrastive analysis tried to demonstrate (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, Selinker (Ellis, 1985) stated that learners can’t reach the end of the interlanguage continuum, that is they can’t achieve complete competence in the foreign language. This happens because they reach a point called fossilization, in which they stop learning and intake isn’t possible anymore, regardless of the quantity or quality of the input received. This means that the learner is not able to elaborate and internalize input any more (Andorno, Ribotta, 1999). In other words, no changes or improvement occur as regards aspects of interlanguage that are different from standard rules (Ciliberti, 2012). At this stage the structures of the foreign language can appear in learners’ output as correct forms or as fossilized errors, depending on the similarity between the structures in the learner’s interlanguage and the forms of the target language. Moreover, the theories on

interlanguage describe the existence of a natural sequence of acquisition of the foreign language: L2 learners pass through the same stages, but not in the same way (Ellis, 1985). In particular, several ‘morpheme studies’ (Ellis, 1985) have shown that most learners follow the same acquisition order as regards grammar structures, regardless of their first language or age. These studies gave strong support to the interlanguage theory, as they seemed to demonstrate that learners progress along the interlanguage continuum very similarly. However, longitudinal studies on negation, interrogation and relative clauses showed how learners of a foreign language go through a gradual development of rules, which includes overlapping stages and the use of transitional forms. These findings questioned the existence of a natural order of acquisition, which should lead the learner from having no knowledge of the L2 to acquiring a perfect knowledge of it (Ellis, 1985).

Other theories are grounded on the difference between two kinds of knowledge. Explicit knowledge exists in the learner’s mind independently from its actual use; it consists of generalizations of the linguistic behaviour and it can be understood by the learner independently from its application. Bialystock adds that it depends on meta-lingual knowledge (Ellis, 1997). On the contrary, implicit knowledge builds learners’ interlanguage system, but they are not aware of having learnt it or even of its existence. It is manifested in output production and can become explicit when the learner reflects on the use of the language he/she makes. In Bialystock’s opinion, this is possible because there can be an interface between the two types of knowledge (Ellis, 1997); not only can implicit knowledge turn into explicit, but explicit knowledge can also act as a facilitator, helping the learner to notice some aspects of the input and to elaborate them (Chini, 2000). On the contrary, Krashen thought that

implicit and explicit knowledge should be treated as totally separate, and that explicit knowledge can never be converted into implicit knowledge (Ellis, 1997). A possible solution of the debate between interface and non-interface position was found by Ellis (1997), who proposed a 'weak interface position'. In Ellis' opinion, explicit knowledge can turn into implicit knowledge only if the learner has achieved the developmental stage that allows him/her to integrate the new rule in his/her interlanguage system.

The dichotomy between the two types of knowledge is reflected in two different ways of learning that derive from them. In implicit learning, natural acquisition of knowledge (and thus of language) takes place and learners induce general principles but they aren't able to 'formulate an understanding of them' (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005). The learner is not aware of the abstract system that is the basis of the forms they have learnt. In contrast, in explicit learning the learner consciously looks for information, formulates and tests hypotheses about the language or assimilates rules that are explicitly offered. Consequently, an attention to form by the learner is required and acquisition is considered to progress more rapidly when explicit knowledge is well developed, that is to say it helps interlanguage evolution and can become implicit if the learner is ready to acquire a particular feature, and when the learner is provided with communicative input, that should be comprehensible to be converted in intake. Moreover, Ellis (1997) points out that implicit and explicit knowledge are not the sole prerequisites for language acquisition, because other factors like the knowledge of the world and of the first language are fundamental. In fact, the former is useful to interpret the messages and inference information from the input received, while the latter influence acquisition

through positive transfer. This means that structures in the first language that are similar to those of the foreign language can be transferred in the learner's interlanguage and contribute to produce correct forms in the target language.

Among the cognitive theories, functionalist approaches have played a very important role in SLA. The connection between language acquisition and its communicative function was held to be fundamental in many different theories. For example, the Competition Model considers 'real language input' as essential to language acquisition, a process through which the learner develops the ability to recognize and give the right value to 'clues', the role of which defines the function of a word, using the criteria of frequency and saliency in input (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005).

On the other hand, in his Processability Model Pienemann (Chini, 2000) recalls the idea of the existence of an acquisition sequence, explaining how the acquisition process follows a precise implicational order. Consequently, language teaching can be successful only if the learner has already reached the previous stage in the sequence of acquisition.

Many other theories on interlanguage have been developed, like for example the Parallel Distributed Processing Model, which ascribes language acquisition to the recognition of correspondences between form and function of utterances found in the input; the Nativization model, which concerns naturalistic language acquisition and describe the process of assimilation as the learner's attempt to make the input conform to the internalized view of the foreign language, and Connectionism, which affirms that rules are built by the learner through the recognition and generalizations of patterns in the input.

To sum up, theories about interlanguage and the acquisition sequence have been of great importance for language pedagogy, because they encouraged teachers and methodologists to create teaching situations that are similar to the setting of naturalistic acquisition; on the other hand, they required some changes in the common teaching practice, like in the treatment of errors, which should be tolerated as part of the natural development of the language and not punished and immediately corrected. In fact, it has now been widely recognized that errors provide evidence that the learner is formulating hypotheses about the foreign language in order to create correct rules, but the fear of making errors still torments both students and teachers (Ciliberti, 2012). In Ciliberti's (2012) opinion, it is fundamental to provide students with a kind of feedback that allows them to become capable of self-correction, which will be necessary in real-life communication. For this reason, Ciliberti (2012) prefers to use the term repair instead of correction, because the latter is often threatening and discouraging for learners. However, the actual strategies through which this kind of feedback can be provided will be described in the second chapter.

A change on the focus was brought by neurofunctional theories, which are based on the connection between language function and neural anatomy. Lamendella (Ellis, 1985), for example, claims that foreign language acquisition corresponds to a precise neurofunctional system, so it can be explained on the basis of the use of the neurofunctional system and the level that is engaged. This theory has also been criticized, as the possibility to identify specific neurofunctions and their neurolinguistic correspondents is still uncertain.

In the last twenty years, the scene of foreign language acquisition research is dominated by the Dynamic System Theory, presented by De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor (2005) as the more valid approach to understand SLA. Their starting point is that language is a complex system that continuously changes and its variables are always interacting. For this reason, it can be described as a dynamic system, which consists of many subsystems like dialects, registers or individual speakers' language. De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor (2005) claim that a language system can reach an 'attractor state' during the process of SLA, in which a subsystem becomes stable for a certain period, even if it has not achieved a correct form. In other words, it reaches fossilization, but only temporarily. Before this happens, the learner experiences some variability and the development of the language system is discontinuous. This approach strongly contrasts with Universal Grammar theories, that claim the possibility for the learner to reach an 'end state' of the development of the language system (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005). Moreover, this model gives importance not only to the learning of a language, but also to forgetting. In fact, language knowledge that is not recovered with regularity becomes less accessible with the passing of time and thus it risks to be forgotten, lowering the proficiency of the learner.

In conclusion, this brief description of the state of the art together with the review of the most influential theories about second language acquisition will serve as sufficient background to analyze the role that grammar has in the foreign language teaching and will allow to link the various methods and approaches that will be analyzed in the next chapter to their theoretical bases.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

#### **2.1 The debate about the role of grammar**

The role of grammar in the acquisition of a second or foreign language has been the focus of a lively debate for ‘thousands years’ (Giunchi, 1990), during which it has followed the changes in the different theories about language acquisition. In fact, various methodologies and approaches to language teaching have followed one another according to the different weight that grammar assumed in language teaching. In particular, hostility towards grammar arose in the 1960s-1970s, when the traditional methods based on the exclusive teaching of grammar were criticized and new approaches that proposed full linguistic immersion spread (Fiorentino, 2009). Subsequently, positions that focused only on communication in teaching a foreign language were challenged in turn and grammar regained an important role in language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 1991).

The negation of the importance of grammar in language acquisition was supported first of all by Krashen (1982). A fundamental premise to Krashen’s view of formal instruction is his theory on language acquisition, which has been already described in the first chapter: in Krashen’s opinion, acquisition and learning are completely separate, and thus learning does not need to precede acquisition in the teaching of a foreign language. As regards grammar, Krashen (1982) recognizes that it can be



useful in language learning as monitor, which can be activated only when the learner has enough time, when he/she has the possibility to focus on the form of the message and has already acquired the knowledge of the rules involved in the production. Krashen (1982) underlines the fact that only a small set of rules is learnable and thus usable as monitor, and that the ideal use of monitor occurs only when the learner uses conscious rules without interfering with communication and thus improving L2 accuracy. Furthermore, Krashen (1982) admits the usefulness of grammar for ‘language appreciation’, that is to say as a demonstration to students that acquisition of structures has taken place, or to allow advanced learners to render their speeches and writing more polished. However, Krashen (1982) states that the theoretical study of grammar as a subject is not useful at all, and that teaching grammar can be valuable only if the foreign language is used as means of communication; in this case, it is the input provided that leads to acquisition, and not grammar as the object of instruction, which can be seen as partly useful, but certainly not as essential in foreign language teaching.

On the other hand, many researchers have tried to restore the role of grammar in the last thirty years. Ellis (1985), for instance, asserts that formal instruction affects the rate and success of second language acquisition. In particular, it has a ‘relative utility’, as it influences proficiency in the foreign language more than mere exposure to L2 does, and an ‘absolute utility’, as it accelerates the acquisition of grammar structures. However, Ellis admits that studies do not assure that these effects depend only on formal instruction, as they can be influenced by a mixing of factors, such as learners’ motivation. Moreover, Ellis (1985) asserts that the route of SLA is not directly influenced by grammar teaching, as the knowledge acquired through formal

instruction usually manifests itself when the learner is focusing on form, and not in spontaneous production, which reflects the order of acquisition of structures.

In addition, Giunchi (1990) believes that grammar is useful for the acquisition of a foreign language, but a pedagogical model of grammar should be proposed, which has the main aim of the internalization of the language system. Skehan (1992) quotes Long's opinion on the usefulness of grammar, explaining how learning develops at a higher rate when instruction is provided. Long (Skehan, 1992) also tries to demonstrate his theory by analyzing different types of errors made by learners: while non-instructed learners make 'errors of omission', that is they do not use necessary structures, learners who received formal instruction make 'errors of commission', that is they overuse structures that have been presented through instruction. In Long's opinion, this kind of error is more likely to disappear, as it is easier for learners to notice that they are doing something superfluous than to perceive that they are omitting something important (Skehan, 1992).

Furthermore, Batstone (1994) affirms the importance of grammar to understand language, as it provides a framework for learners to structure their learning of the foreign language. Moreover, grammar is necessary in language processing, as it helps learners to locate themselves in a relation to the surrounding world, and it shapes the order and organization of information. In addition, it becomes more useful as learner's distance to the target language grows (Batstone, 1994).

The role of grammar is then analyzed again by Ellis (1997), who reviews his previous position, claiming that grammar teaching helps the development of accuracy in L2 and accelerates learners' progress in the sequence of acquisition of

language. He also adds that the effects of formal instruction are often durable, even if there are some exceptions.

Support is also given to the importance of grammar by Purpura (2004), who points out that grammar plays a central role in language teaching, as it influences the success of foreign language learning, and by Duso (2007). She tries to demonstrate the central role of formal instruction explaining that metalinguistic analysis is necessary to acquire a foreign language and that its process should be supported by grammar teaching. Duso (2007) bases her statements on the fact that communicative approaches have been considered as ineffective as they lead to formal inaccuracy in L2 production. Moreover, instruction is considered to be useful at any stage of acquisition. In fact, adults access it easily, as they are used to abstract processes, and children can exploit it as a support for implicit learning (Duso, 2007). The central issue is, in Duso's opinion, not whether grammar should be taught, but how it can be applied to foreign language teaching. Ur (Duso, 2007), for example, proposes that formal instruction should be integrated into a lesson, and not studied for its own sake.

Furthermore, some studies have been carried out to demonstrate the usefulness of formal instruction from the learners' point of view. Bade (2008) demonstrates that formal instruction is not only welcomed by students, but also demanded, showing that there are some cultural expectations regarding this issue; the only condition expressed by learners is that grammar teaching should not take precedence over other aspects of language teaching. In addition, Farjami (2011) carried out a study among students at academic level, which shows learners' interest in studying grammar. In particular, students stated they enjoy learning grammar and recognize its importance,

as it helps the development of language proficiency and language skills. Moreover, they feel more motivated if they are aware of what they are studying and of the reason why it is important. Farjami's (2011) conclusion is that grammar teaching should not be removed from classroom foreign language teaching, but alternatives to traditional methods to teach it should be found.

The last source that is worth citing here is the *Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione* (2012), a document drawn up by the Italian board of supervisors, which gives the guidelines to teachers of primary and secondary schools, providing the criteria to follow in the teaching of their specific subjects. As regards English as a foreign language at secondary schools, which is the branch on which the third part of this dissertation will focus, the *Indicazioni* call for attention to metalinguistic reflection. In fact, this allows the learners to recognize the conventions of a linguistic community and the differences between various languages, and to develop self-assessment abilities and awareness of the process of acquisition.

In conclusion, nowadays teachers still ask themselves whether they should intervene in language acquisition by teaching grammar or try to reproduce the conditions of natural language acquisition. However, the debate had become more complex, as its focus has shifted to the distinction between implicit or explicit grammar, where the former consists of the set of rules that are concealed within the language system, while the latter is characterized by teacher's explanation of rules and their application by students.

## 2.2 The concept of grammar

Before analyzing the debate on the role of grammar in greater detail, describing the methods that have followed one another during the past decades and the two main underlying tendencies, an explanation of what is generally meant by grammar will follow.

The history of grammar analysis goes back to the ancient Greeks, who transformed it from the art of writing and recognizing letters into a science of rules that govern the production of texts. Both the Greeks and Romans, who adopted the Greek analysis for Latin, used grammar to teach people how to use languages, which were then employed in many fields, such as politics, philosophy and religion (De Mauro, 2009; Celce-Murcia, 1991). Then, during the Renaissance, the study of Greek and Latin grammars spread thanks to the invention of printing, and many formal studies on language developed. On the other hand, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was an increase in the use of vernaculars and the study of languages focused on their use and not on their formal analysis, as there was a strong interest in learning the languages of other countries. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the difference between implicit and explicit grammar emerged, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the formal study of classical languages took over again. From that moment, a continual swing between the importance of language use and formal analysis has characterized the history of grammar (Celce-Murcia, 1991). As regards the present days, the concept of grammar is polysemous, as it can indicate the internal functioning of the linguistic system; learners' explicit knowledge of the language, which is described by grammars; and the metalinguistic model used to describe that explicit knowledge (Giunchi, 1990).

In addition, the definition of grammar is not an univocal one. The most traditional description of grammar is given by Bade (2008), who presents it as the structure of a language, a set of rules that shows changes in words and the way they connect together to form new units. Rivers (1968) adds that grammar is often seen as a set of rules, which are expressed with a difficult terminology and have many exceptions. However, these positions are challenged by a different view of grammar, which has been developed in recent years. Today grammar is not considered as a mere set of morphosyntactic rules, but as a means to communicate, that is to 'mediate words and context' (Duso, 2007). In this way, grammar becomes a set of rules that allow the speaker to understand a language and produce correct utterances. Duso (2007) also lists the different levels to which the concept of grammar refers: the phonological level, which includes pronunciation, rhythm and intonation; the morphosyntactic level; the sociolinguistic level, which involves the varieties and registers of a language; the lexical level, which consists of semantics and morphology; the pragmatic level, that is to say the communicative acts carried out through language; and the textual level, which embodies the elements of a text and the different kinds of texts. Larsen-Freeman (1991) explains the same thing from another point of view, asserting that there are three dimensions to deal with when teaching grammar, which are: the form of structures, that is how linguistic structures are built; the meaning of the structures, which is lexical but also grammatical; and the pragmatic conditions that govern the use of structures, such as the relationship between grammar and context. These are interconnected parts of the same unit, and thus they are not organized hierarchically, but they are all at the same level of importance.

When describing grammar, some distinctions should be made. Batstone (1994), for example, separates grammar as product and grammar as process. Grammar as product is explained as the description of the components of the language system and of particular grammar features through a static perspective; as this kind of formal grammar is characterized by exceptions and variables, it is important in the process of teaching to go from broad generalizations down to the details of the real examples. On the other hand, grammar as process consists of the various ways in which it develops in communication; it plays an important role in language teaching, as the knowledge of formal grammar is not enough to allow learners to communicate (Batstone, 1994). In addition, Willis (2003) identifies three different kinds of grammar. First, the grammar of structure describes the way in which language items link together to form larger units, such as the noun phrase; it is governed by rules and its learning is supported by instruction. Second, the grammar of orientation includes those features that allow the speaker to relate the elements of a sentence, such as verb tense. Finally, pattern grammar describes patterns associated with words; this is useful because the building of patterns provides the learner with phrases ready to use during communication. Lastly, the importance of pedagogical grammar is underlined by Giunchi (1990), who describes it as a grammar that has the main aim of enriching learners' ability to use the foreign language, starting from the point of view of the non-native speaker.

Now that the concept of grammar has been illustrated in its main characteristics, an overview of the methods used in the last decades to teach foreign languages and of the weight that grammar assumed in each of them will follow.

### **2.3 Traditional and innovative methods to teach a foreign language**

In the first chapter of this dissertation the main theories of language acquisition have been described, in order to provide a background to this research on the role of grammar in foreign language teaching. Now that the framework is clear, the actual methods that arose from those theories will be analyzed together with the different weight that grammar assumed over time. First of all, the meaning of the term method has to be specified; in fact, a method is a ‘set of procedures’(Celce-Murcia, 1991) that shows how to teach a language and it is more specific than an approach, that is to say a theory on language teaching, as those described in chapter one.

Rivers (1968) identifies the ‘major methods of the past’, which are the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Reading Method and the Audio-lingual Method. These methods developed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and they had widespread use and strong credibility at the time.

The Grammar-Translation Method was used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the teaching of classical languages, but was then adopted in modern language teaching, in order to raise them to the same status as classical ones, the study of which was considered much more important (Celce-Murcia, 1991). This method was characterized by great attention to grammar and vocabulary, the importance of translation, the provision of literary texts to read and the use of the learners’ first language as a means of instruction. Usually a lesson based on the Grammar-Translation Method started with the explanation of rules by the teacher, then a bilingual list of vocabulary was provided, and a literary text that emphasized the presented structures was read by students. Afterwards, the teacher proposed many exercises to the learners, most of which consisted of translation from the first language into the foreign one and vice



versa (Krashen, 1982). The aim of this method was primarily to provide students with accuracy in writing, and to allow them to understand grammar, as well as to enjoy and understand literary texts. However, its weaknesses have been pointed out, for example, by Celce-Murcia (1991). She states that this method cannot be effective with students who do not appreciate 'abstract thinking' and the study of the foreign language in general. Moreover, she underlines that it does not allow for the development of communicative abilities, as the learner has a passive role in the lesson and the language studied is that of literary texts, not of the real world. Krashen (1982) adds to the reasons for the lack of opportunities for communication the fact that the Grammar-Translation Method focuses only on form and that readings do not always contain interesting topics for students.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Grammar-Translation Method was challenged by a different procedure, which was based on theories that ascribed language acquisition to exposure to input and practice of speaking: the Direct Method. Its premise was that learning occurs thanks to the association of words with objects and actions, without the mediation of the learners' first language (Rivers, 1968). Thus, the aim of the Direct Method was to teach students to think in the foreign language; to do so, the foreign language was used as the only means of communication, and it was exploited through dialogues, pictures and actions. Moreover, the teacher was required to have a native-like proficiency in the target language (Celce-Murcia, 1991). In this method, grammar was taught implicitly, and students made generalizations from what they had learnt inductively, while the teacher helped them with questions that induced answers containing the structure to learn. Accuracy was also paid attention to; consequently, even if comprehensible input was provided, it

was not completely realistic, as it aimed at grammatical accuracy (Rivers, 1968; Krashen, 1982). The Direct Method proved to be useful, as it dissipated learners' inhibitions to speak, but it was found to lead to inaccuracy at the beginning, as with this approach students start to express themselves in the foreign language too early and they are not able to speak correctly (Rivers, 1968).

Grammar study was also put aside in the Reading Method, which was developed in the 1940s. This method was based on the belief that reading comprehension was the most important skill to acquire in a foreign language and it aimed at the direct comprehension of the meaning of texts, without translation into the first language. The readings given to students were created for the lesson, and the frequency and saliency of structures were taken care of, as learners had to acquire new words and patterns through reading. As has been said before, grammar had a marginal role in this method, as it was taught only when it was useful for reading, focusing on the recognition of structures, but not on their production (Rivers, 1968; Celce-Murcia, 1991). The supporters of the Reading Method stated that it allowed learners to follow their own rate of learning, as each of them had the possibility to work on readings of different difficulties. However, the method was criticized, as it provided a great quantity of reading, but not quality at the same time; in fact, students were required to read many pages in a lesson, but not to understand them in detail (Rivers, 1968).

Between the 1940s and the 1960s a new method arose, starting from the new emphasis given by World War II to the need to be able to speak and understand foreign languages (Rivers, 1968). The Audio-lingual Method based itself on behaviourist theories, which described language acquisition as a process of habit formation. For this reason, it made wide use of 'mimicry' and 'memorization'

(Celce-Murcia, 1991), favouring listening and speaking abilities, rather than reading and writing skills. Consequently, pronunciation had a fundamental role in the application of this method, while grammar structures were taught sequentially and inductively. In order to develop oral skills first, continual practice of everyday language was encouraged. Usually, a dialogue was presented by the teacher, then repeated and memorized by students; afterwards, pattern drills on the structures presented in the dialogue were provided (Krashen, 1982). Learning, then, occurred by analogy, as the teacher did not explain the structures involved in the exercises explicitly; on the contrary, he/she only described what had been done by students (Giunchi, 1990). For this reason, the Audio-lingual Method was definitely in contrast to the Grammar-Translation Method (Duso, 2007). This method was considered as suitable for young learners, as it allowed for learning through practical activities. Moreover, it encouraged the development of comprehension and fluency in the foreign language, and the use of real language was seen as a source of motivation for students, who enjoyed participating in the lesson. On the other hand, the practice of listening and repeating dialogues could become boring to learners. In addition, students could encounter some difficulties in applying what they had studied to contexts that are different from those they practiced in classroom (Rivers, 1968).

While the Audio-lingual Method was spreading in the U.S.A., its British counterpart developed: the Situational Method. This method was based on the importance of the spoken language and on the exclusive use of the foreign language as means of instruction. Unlike the Audio-lingual Method, the Situational Method included a gradual presentation of grammar structures, which were taught from the most simple

to the most complex and around which realistic situations were created, in order to allow the students to practice the foreign language (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

Very different methods from those described above were created from the 1970s, when nativist, environmentalist and cognitive theories drew attention to the importance of input and to the learner's role as creator of rules. Blair (1991) divides these new methods in three categories: comprehension-based methods, which aimed to teach the learner to speak in the foreign language through the reception of input; production-based methods, which relied on the function of pushed output; and humanistic and psychosuggestive methods, which had the goal of lowering learners' affective filters in order to foster acquisition.

Starting from comprehension-based methods, the Total Physical Response by Asher (Blair, 1991) was certainly a very innovative approach, which based itself on the way children learn their mother tongue. Asher believed that comprehension occurs when children have to respond to some input with an action, which functions as a sort of confirmation of comprehension by the young learner. For this reason, Asher developed a method to teach foreign language that was based on instructions given by the teacher, which implied the performance of a series of action (Blair, 1991). In particular, students had to interpret the teacher's commands and obey them through physical reactions; these commands were always contextualized, so that there could be a focus on the grammar structures employed in the instructions given by the teacher. Moreover, learners were not forced to speak, but they started producing utterances in the foreign language only when they felt ready to do so (Krashen, 1982). This method, which aimed to develop communication skills through comprehension of the foreign language, could be very motivating, thanks to the

novelty of its procedures, and actually provided a great amount of input (Krashen, 1982). On the other hand, it was criticized for not teaching students the 'survival use of language' (Blair, 1991).

A very famous comprehension-based method is the Natural Approach, developed by Krashen and Terrel (1983). This method was based on Krashen's Monitor Theory (Krashen, 1982) and aimed to promote spontaneous learning of the foreign language, following the learner's natural order of acquisition (Duso, 2007). For this reason, students were provided with a lot of comprehensible input and the focus of the activities was on the negotiation of meaning and on fluency, rather than on accuracy (Blair, 1991). The first step to achieve was the comprehension of input, and then production of output was developed during the acquisition process, without any attempt to force learners to speak. Consequently, most of the activities aimed at the provision of comprehensible input and were usually organized in three different levels: personal identification, personal experiences and opinions. In addition, some activities of conscious learning were proposed to students. In fact, grammar was not considered as central in the Natural Approach, as its aim was to make the learner acquire the ability to communicate in the foreign language within real life situations, and not to learn a set of grammar rules (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). However, a certain degree of grammar was recognized to be necessary to perform the monitor function in the learner's language system; in this teaching methodology, grammar features were automatically provided within input and they were acquired through communication activities (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). Finally, no attention was given to error correction, as the focus was on the meaning and not on the form of production; for this reason, errors were usually tolerated in the early stages of

acquisition (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). The main critique that has been made to this method is the fact that it could imply a higher risk of fossilization, as incorrect forms are tolerated in output and thus they can become stable in the learner's language system more quickly (Blair, 1991).

Finally, the Diglot-Wave Input developed by Burling (Blair, 1991) in the 1980s proposed another innovative way to increase the comprehensibility of the foreign language. Burling proposed providing students with texts that had been translated from the foreign language into learners' first language, in a version that was strongly influenced by the syntax of the foreign language; then this version was gradually modified to become more and more similar to the original text, and yet remaining comprehensible for students. The passage through the different adaptations was taught to allow learners to comprehend the text, approaching the foreign language without hindering comprehension (Blair, 1991). An oral version of this method was advanced by Lentulay (Blair, 1991), who suggested telling students stories in the first language, substituting some words and expressions with their translation in the foreign language when they were comprehensible from the context. In this way, the mix of first and foreign language increased comprehensibility and the frequency of foreign words in the text forced their memorization by learners (Blair, 1991).

As regards production-based methods, two of them are worth mentioning, because of their spread in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Silent Way and Sheltered Initiation Language Learning.

The Silent Way, developed by Gattegno (Blair, 1991), implied that the teacher used the foreign language in classroom as little as possible, while students were forced to produce output through the use of gestures, colours, charts and other similar devices.

This method allowed learners to make hypotheses about the language, test them in their production and finally correct them when it was necessary, so that they could have an active role in the learning process; in fact, the learning of the foreign language progressed depending on students' output, and the criteria of correctness were set by learners themselves. However, the Silent Way was judged too ambitious and slow, and suitable for developing linguistic rather than communicative competence (Blair, 1991).

On the other hand, this is how Blair (1991: 34) presents Bar-lev's Sheltered Initiation Language Learning:

Bar-lev's heresy proposed that learners be sheltered at first from a deluge of grammatical, orthographic, phonetic and semantic detail so that they can concentrate on producing fluid, uninhibited speech.

In this method, language was presented to students following the progressive levels of the interlanguage, which included only restricted grammar structures and vocabulary. This was meant to allow learners to develop fluency and avoid hesitancy in speaking. Furthermore, the criterion of learnability was applied so as to choose what grammar features were to be presented. Blair's definition of this method as 'heresy' is probably due to its originality, but the method was criticized also because it led to a lack of accuracy, as it focused mainly on fluency in oral production (Blair, 1991).

Other innovative methods are those described by Blair (1991) as 'humanistic and psychosuggestive approaches'. Among these, Suggestopedia was certainly the most remarkable method. It was based on a branch of philosophy called suggestology and consisted in intensive teaching of the foreign language to groups of learners. In particular, the teacher introduced new materials by reading some dialogues, which dealt with topics that were interesting for

students and useful for communication. After the first reading, the teacher proposed the dialogue again, reading it in an emotional way, for instance, or with the aid of music; in the meantime, students did exercises of breathing or meditation (Krashen, 1982). Thus, this method exploited means such as music therapy or relaxation in order to remove learners' inhibitions and 'false limitations that cultural norms impose on learning' (Blair, 1991). The aim of Suggestopedia was thus to create the ideal learning condition, in order to foster students' language acquisition.

Furthermore, the Values Clarification Approach tried to reduce affective filters, and thus resistance to learning, basing instruction in foreign language classes on topics that concerned learners and their relationship with the others and with events. In this way, students had something real to talk about and were thus motivated to participate in conversation (Blair, 1991).

The Problem-posing Approach also had the goal of making the learner take part in conversation and it tried to promote dialogues through the use of pictures or other visual stimuli, together with 'problem-posing questions' (Blair, 1991). Students were involved in the process of learning, as they had to solve problems through tasks, while the teacher provided them with feedback, but not with solutions. This involvement of learners was then expected to turn into their willingness to acquire the structures they needed to complete the tasks (Blair, 1991).

Last but not least, the Counseling-learning Community Language Learning was another inventive method and it based on a holistic view of learning, which was to involve the entire person of the learner, considering his/her emotions



and personality; to do so, the teacher had to be able to understand students and their struggle to learn. In actual fact, in the first part of the lesson learners conducted conversation in the foreign language, sitting in circle, without the help of any materials; the teacher helped them to produce accurate output and occasionally gave instructions on the structures needed by students. However, the most important stage of the lesson was the last one, in which the students, together with their teacher, reflected on the learning experience they had just had (Blair, 1991).

This overview of the most influential methods of the past shows clearly how the role of grammar has switched from being considered important to being neglected many times; some of these methods, in fact, are based entirely on grammar instruction, while others reject it in favour of the development of communication abilities. The aim here is obviously not to determine which of these methods is the best, as it has already been explained that such an operation is virtually impossible (see chapter one). On the other hand, it is possible to deduce from these different methodologies the two main tendencies that have always characterized the role of grammar in foreign language teaching, which correspond respectively to the desire to use the foreign language communicatively and to the recognition of the need ‘for a linguistic focus on language learning’ (Long, 1991). These two trends have been described in several different ways by researchers, but here the definition given by Long (1991) will be adopted. Thus, the first tendency will be referred to as ‘focus on meaning’, while the second as ‘focus on forms’.

## **2.4 Focus on forms vs focus on meaning**

Focus on forms is a way to teach a foreign language in which the aim is to teach specific grammar structures and make students acquire knowledge of them (Poole, 2005). As a consequence, linguistic forms are the centre of lessons and syllabi; they are taught sequentially, as it is important for the learner to be ‘psycholinguistically ready’ to acquire them (Long, 1991). In fact, students do not pass ‘from ignorance to mastery’ (Long, 1991) in one step, but they go through stages in language acquisition; in particular, they learn a new structure, then use it in an often incorrect way, until they achieve accuracy. In order to decide which structures to teach first, some criteria are followed: simplicity, that is to say that features that are easier to acquire are taught first; frequency, which means that structures that are met often in input have precedence over the others; and contrastive difficulty, that is that those grammar features that, compared to the first language, imply less difficulties are taught before (Ahmed, Alamin, 2012). An example of an approach that was based on a focus on forms is the Grammar-Translation Method.

Focus on forms is obviously teacher-centred, as structures are necessarily presented by the teacher, and the way in which they are presented depends on the choice of an explicit or implicit approach. Explicit instruction is based on the importance of studying grammar rules, and aims to teach structures in order to allow learners to build ‘conscious representations’ of them (Ellis, 1997), and to organize them ‘accurately and efficiently’ (Scott, 1990). In particular, grammar rules can be presented deductively or inductively. In the first case, rules are explained to students, who practice them through exercises and tasks.

In addition, learners are provided with metalinguistic information. On the other hand, the inductive teaching of grammar implies that data about the use of a linguistic feature are shown to students within a corpus, in which they have to find regularities and then generalize the results, in order to induce grammar rules (Ellis, 1997; Krashen, 1982). On the other hand, implicit instruction aims to make the students acquire grammar structures naturally and through their use, thus grammar features are presented in meaningful contexts, to which learners are exposed (Ellis, 1997; Scott, 1990).

Since focus on forms is based on the teaching of grammar structures, it is important to analyze how these structures can be made noticeable in input, so that learners can acquire them more effectively. Purpura (2004) lists some techniques to increase the saliency of linguistic forms; these can be based on rules, input, feedback, or practice. Rule-based techniques involve consciousness-raising activities which include both rules and data to apply them. In addition, some input-based activities are input flooding, in which a great amount of input is given to learners; typographical input enhancement, which implies a visual manipulation of written input; and comprehension practice. Moreover, practice-based activities imply that learners process the input received in order to produce output. Finally, feedback-based techniques involve any method to provide learners with feedback on their errors. In this regard, Krashen (1982) gives some directives on the provision of feedback. First of all, he states that error correction is useful, as it allows the learner to become aware of a wrong representation of a rule he/she has in mind. Moreover, Krashen (1982) adds that feedback should be provided only when

the learner is focusing on form, so that it does not interfere with communication; the best way to correct an error, in Krashen's opinion, is to provide the student with the correct form, or to make learners discover the error by themselves. Finally, he affirms that only errors that inhibit the comprehension of the message and that occur frequently should be corrected. However, a further analysis on feedback provision will be presented in the next section on focus on form.

In conclusion, focus on forms is supported by the claim that grammar instruction contributes to the development of foreign language acquisition (Purpura, 2004). A study by Scott (1990), for example, demonstrates how students are not able to organize 'linguistic elements in the grammatical framework' if they are not provided with grammar instruction. Moreover, she states that learners who have been instructed with an explicit method have a better outcome in language use (Scott, 1990). However, focus on forms has been strongly criticized and challenged by a completely different approach to foreign language teaching, called focus on meaning (Long, 1991).

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some radical changes led to a different view on foreign language teaching: during and after World War II people became aware of the importance of knowing foreign languages to communicate, and thus the use of language acquired more importance than its formal study; then, Chomsky's theories about Universal Grammar (see chapter one) shifted the focus from the language to the learner and his/her characteristics (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005). Moreover, some studies started to be carried out in order to demonstrate that grammar instruction interferes with the acquisition of

the foreign language and its native-like use. These studies showed that a foreign language is not acquired thanks to formal instruction (Purpura, 2004). On the contrary, communicative lessons encourage language acquisition, as communication is seen as the primary motivation to learn a foreign language (Bade, 2008).

The aim of focus on meaning is to provide students with occasions to use the language and to develop their communication abilities. For this reason, learners' attention is drawn to the message that has to be conveyed, more than on its form, and language is experienced as a means to communicate, rather than an object to analyze. Consequently, in communicative lessons (that is, based on focus on meaning) the 'teaching sequence' (Willis, 2003) should always start with a communicative task.

Thus, an important role is played in focus on meaning approach by the quality of communication in class. Ellis (1997) points out some difficulties that can emerge when communicative lessons are carried out in classroom setting. First of all, it can be difficult to create an 'acquisition-rich environment' (Ellis, 1997), because of the number of the participants, the teacher's ability to control conversation and learners' attitude towards the teaching method. Moreover, the input offered by other students and not by the teacher often turns out to be impoverished, as the sources of this kind of input are at the same or a lower level than its addressee.

Focus on meaning implies that learners are exposed to the foreign language and are provided with opportunities to improvise. In addition, students are also incited to reflect on the language structures they use. However, a different

approach has been proposed by Krashen, who advocated the complete abandonment of grammar teaching during foreign language lessons (Ellis, 1997). The zero option refused intervention in the teaching of a foreign language and based itself on empirical studies, which demonstrated that instruction neither influences the order of acquisition of structures, nor assures effective acquisition by the learner.

On the other hand, this position has been challenged by several studies, which demonstrate the usefulness of grammar instruction and state the possibility to integrate grammar learning in a communicative approach (Ellis, 1997). These studies show: that grammar instruction can produce explicit knowledge, which can then be converted into implicit knowledge, which is necessary in communication; that when instruction does not cause acquisition directly, it can facilitate it, as learners understand structures which they use in communication; that formal instruction allows students to outperform those who do not receive it. Furthermore, some evidence has shown that the communicative approach fails to provide learners with accuracy and with knowledge of some particular grammar features (Ellis, 1997).

In conclusion, focus on meaning has proved to be useful in the developing of learners' discourse and communicative competence. On the other hand, it does not seem to be able to provide students with a full grammar competence (Ellis, 1997).

## **2.5 Focus on form: a possible solution**

As the discussion in the previous section demonstrates, it seems impossible to find a balance between formal instruction and communication in foreign language teaching. However, some researchers think that it is possible to create a 'synergy' (Larsen-Freeman, 1991) between these two tendencies, even if a different conception of teaching grammar is necessary. In fact, grammar instruction should not be seen as the mere teaching of rules, but as an instrument that allows learners to achieve accuracy and appropriateness in the use of the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Thus, a good solution can be to mix focus on forms and focus on meaning, input and instruction (De Bot, Lowie, Verspoor, 2005; Long, 1991).

Long (1991) defines this approach focus on form, which implies not only instruction on single grammar structures, but also an attention to the relationship between form and meaning of words. The aim of focus on form is to allow students to be accurate in their production in the foreign language, and this goal is reached drawing their attention to grammar structures during activities which focus mainly on meaning; in this way, grammar appears only incidentally during lessons, and it does not divert learners' attention from the conveyance of meaning (Long, 1991). Consequently, students are exposed to oral and written input, which should be very similar to real-life language; then, grammar content is added. As concerns the latter, two different views have been developed: Long (1991) states that activities that focus on form should be carried out when students need them, while Spada (Duso, 2007) asserts the need to predetermine form-focused activities during communicative tasks.

Focus on form is thus a kind of instruction which gives importance to communicative language teaching and, at the same time, recognizes the usefulness of the study of grammar structures (Poole, 2005). In particular, Terrel (1991, in Duso, 2007) states the significant role of grammar in foreign language teaching, distancing himself from the zero option proposed by Krashen. He recognizes that the reflection on language forms can help the processing of the data provided within input, stress the relationship between form and meaning of complex structures and act as monitor.

Duso (2007) describes some techniques that are used to apply focus on form during lessons and divides them in techniques centred on input or on output. Some input-centred techniques are those described in the section about focus on forms, such as input flooding, input enhancement or comprehension activities. Moreover, Duso (2007) mentions consciousness-raising activities, in which input is analyzed by students through group work, in order to make observations on the structures and create rules; and processing instruction, which is based on the idea that learners can focus on input only if they have understood its meaning. On the other hand, output-centred techniques base themselves on the importance of output in language acquisition. One of these is, for instance, the comprehensible output hypothesis by Swain (1993), which involves not only output production, but also reflection on it, in order to increase its accuracy and suitability to the communicative situation. To do so, learners' pushed output is integrated with feedback from the teacher. This, in fact, helps learners to notice the gap between what they want to say and the



utterances they are able to produce and allows them to test their hypotheses about language.

Focus on form has been described so far as a type of instruction, but actually many different kinds of focus on form can be distinguished (Ellis, Basturkmen, Loewen, 2002). Planned focus on form, for example, implies the use of tasks that have been created to induce the use of a specific grammar structure, even if learners focus on meaning and are thus not aware of which the structure is; this method allows for an intensive focus on a specific feature, and thus it promotes acquisition, but it is time consuming. On the other hand, incidental focus on form involves unfocused tasks, whose aim is to cause the use of ‘a particular sample of the target language’ (Ellis, Basturkmen, Loewen, 2002); in this way, focus on grammar structures occurs incidentally during the completion of the task and many different features can be dealt with during the same lesson, even if in a more superficial way.

Other types of focus on form differ according to the different strategies that are used to draw students’ attention to form during communicative activities (Ellis, Basturkmen, Loewen, 2002). Reactive focus on form regards the treatment of learners’ errors, which can be carried out through negotiation or feedback. In particular, negotiation can take place during conversation, when errors made by students cause communication problems and thus draw their attention to the form of the message. In this case, the teacher can negotiate the meaning of the incorrect utterance through requests of clarification, in which the student should solve the problem and then reformulate the sentence, or confirmation, in which only a repetition of the utterance is required. Moreover, negotiation of

meaning can be didactic, when the teacher decides to correct the error, even if it does not cause any problem of communication; in this case, the risk is that of interrupting the ‘communicative flow’ (Ellis, Basturkmen, Loewen, 2002). On the other hand, feedback can be provided implicitly or explicitly by the teacher. Implicit feedback usually consists in the teacher’s formulation of recasts, that is to say a reformulation of the incorrect utterance by the teacher in order to make the student notice the error. However, the learner might not perceive the difference between his/her utterance and the recast. On the contrary, explicit feedback is provided when the teacher repeats the learner’s utterance stressing the error through intonation, direct signals or the use of meta-language. In this case, the student has to try self-correction and, if necessary, the teacher can provide a recast; explicit feedback is thus more intrusive and can obstacle communication.

Finally, Ellis, Basturkmen, Loewen (2002) analyze pre-emptive focus on form, in which a specific grammar feature becomes the topic of conversation by initiative of the teacher or the students. If the conversation is learner-initiated, the teacher has many options: he/she can answer the question, redirect it to the class, decide to answer in another moment or not to answer at all. The case in which the teacher decides to deal with the suggested problem is important for acquisition, as the conversation certainly focuses on students’ gaps in linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, the conversation may be boring for the rest of the class, if it concerns something that the other students already know. Teacher-initiated conversation, instead, occurs when the teacher thinks that a

structure might be too difficult for students, so he/she decides to interrupt the communicative activity to explain it.

The effects of focus on form have been analyzed by several studies, which are summarized by Ellis (1997). Generally speaking, it can be said that form-focused instruction does not work when acquisition is judged on the basis of proficiency in spontaneous speech, as it does not seem to work in unplanned speech. However, focus on form helps to improve accuracy when it is planned and extensive (Ellis, 1997). Furthermore, focus on form has been seen to be valid, as it helps learners to acquire grammar the structures they would not be ready to learn and makes students aware of the structures they use in conversation (Ahmed, Alamin, 2012).

Other studies about the durability of the effects of focus on form demonstrate that for the results of instruction to last, it is necessary that learners have the possibility to use the features they study within real communication, and that they are motivated. Moreover, the permanency of grammar structures in the learner's language system depends also on the nature of the structures themselves (Ellis, 1997).

Nevertheless, some problems concerning focus on form have been pointed out. In particular, Poole (2005) describes educational, practical, and cultural difficulties, which could undermine the actual performance of focus on form. First of all, Poole (2005) underlines that teachers are often limited in their work both by 'curricula constraints', which usually propose a fixed order to teach grammar structures, and by materials, which rarely dedicate some space to communicative tasks. Moreover, practical problems involve the size of the

class, as it should be quite small in order to allow the teacher to interact with single students during their production and to give them some time for conversation. However, Poole (2005) admits that this conditions are rarely encountered in real schools, where interaction between students and also between teacher and student is quite infrequent. In addition, Poole (2005) states that teachers should have ‘near native-like fluency’, in order to use the foreign language as the only means of instruction, while many teachers nowadays seem to lack this proficiency. Another obstacle to the exclusive use of the foreign language in class is that teachers and students often share their first language. Consequently, it is easy for them to switch from foreign to first language in order to solve communication problems. Finally, culture influences focus on form, as this approach requires an environment in which students feel free to participate actively in the lesson, but this is not obvious for every culture. Now that the positive and negative aspects of focus on form have been described, the one valid method of applying it will be presented in the next section.

## **2.6 Task based learning**

Task based learning is an approach to foreign language teaching that is based, as its name suggests, on tasks. A task is defined as an activity in which foreign language is used to communicate and the focus is on the result, on the meaning that has to be conveyed, and not on the forms used to perform the task (Willis, 1996; Seedhouse, 1999). However, during the performance of a task, the student’s mind subconsciously notices some linguistic structures (Duso, 2007).

Thus, task based learning is an interactive approach that allows the teacher to integrate communicative teaching and grammar instruction in the same lesson. In order to be effective and improve learners' accuracy and fluency at the same time, communication tasks have to: focus on meaning; provide some gap between the language that students know and the one they need to do the task; offer opportunities for negotiation of meaning; and let the learners experiment language and choose the resources for the completion of the activity (Ellis, 1997).

Obviously, there are many types of tasks that can be proposed to students. In Bade's (2008) opinion, the most important thing that teachers have to consider is that the tasks they prepare are appropriate for their students. First of all, one can distinguish between closed tasks, which have specific goals and are structured in detail, and open tasks, which are characterized by less specific goals, and thus imply a less predictable outcome (Willis, 1996).

Moreover, tasks can be categorized on the basis of the way in which they make the learner focus on form. First, Ellis (1997) describes focused communication tasks, which show how a structure is naturally used in the foreign language, but can be performed without using that structure. In these tasks, a grammar structure can be made noticeable through the design of the task or the methodology used to complete it. Ellis (1997) argues that this methodology is the best way to draw students' attention to a particular form, as they are likely to stop focusing on communication and draw their attention to learning, if they realize that the task has been created to focus on linguistic features. Second, production tasks are activities that can be performed easily if a particular

structure is used, but can be completed also without employing it. Third, tasks in which a language structure is essential are very difficult to create, as it is hard to predict which language forms students are going to use in the performance of the task (Willis, 1996).

Tasks can also be distinguished by the kind of activities they entail. For instance, there can be listing tasks, in which learners do brainstorming or fact-finding activities, which generate a lot of conversation; sorting tasks, in which elements have to be sequenced, categorized or classified by learners; tasks in which information has to be compared; problem-solving tasks, which are often challenging and satisfying for students; tasks that involve the sharing of personal experience, which are very similar to real conversation; and creative tasks, which combine different types of activities in order to create a project (Willis, 1996). Thus, the starting points can be very different, but what all types of tasks have in common is that they imply the use of spontaneous language by the learners. However, the use of planned language can also be brought on by asking students to produce a version of the solution of the task to be presented in public. In this way, the preparation of a speech can help learners to enhance the language used (Willis, 1996). Alternatively, tasks can be integrated with feedback, which leads the learner to produce pushed output; this can improve the accuracy of those grammar structures that he/she has already acquired (Ellis, 1997).

The typical task, as described by Willis (1996), is usually divided into three parts: a pre-task, a task cycle and the focus on language. In the pre-task, the teacher introduces the topic and the activities students are going to do. In

particular, the teacher presents the useful vocabulary to the class, helps students to understand instructions about the task and sometimes shows learners a recording of a similar task. This first stage is very important, as it gives the necessary guidelines for group work.

Subsequently, the task cycle starts with the students performing the activities of the task. In the meantime, the teacher monitors students' work and stops it when most groups have finished it. Then, students are required to produce a report in which they explain to the class how they performed the task; in this phase, the teacher gives feedback and help students preparing a final draft. Finally, each group reports the task orally to the class and then groups compare their work with the contribution of the teacher, who gives feedback and sum up the results. During this stage, students are provided with several opportunities to use the language, which are essential for acquisition to take place. Moreover, the report phase allows learners to improve accuracy and internalize the grammar structures they use.

The last step is the focus on language form, during which students draw their attention to the language they have used, analyzing the transcripts of their reports and practicing new structures through exercises provided by the teacher. This last part is as important as the others, as it make learners internalize the language and not focus only on meaning; this occurs when the learner realizes that he/she has more to learn, because the process of restructuring of their interlanguage is not at the end (Skehan, 1992).

Even if a task follows these three stages accurately, its success is not automatic. Skehan (1992) affirms that the sequencing of tasks is a fundamental

criterion to consider, as tasks must be ‘at the right difficulty’ and should follow a ‘pedagogic sequence’ to be effective. In fact, when a task meets these conditions, it is challenging for the student, who is motivated to analyze the language he/she uses, allowing the development of interlanguage to take place. Skehan (1992) identifies three conditions needed so as to organize an efficient task sequencing: code features, that is to say the difficulty of the foreign language involved; performance conditions, which include communicative pressure and communication strategies used by learners; and cognition, explained as the mental activity that is necessary to build meanings underlying output production in the target language.

In addition, Willis (1996) affirms that age should be considered when preparing a communication task. In particular, a great amount of exposure to the foreign language is necessary with beginners, in order to make them acquire the language naturally. Moreover, a relaxed atmosphere is required, and students should not be forced to speak, even if group work can help them trying to express themselves in the target language. Consequently, the pre-task stage is usually longer, many short tasks are better than a more complex one, and the report phase is often eliminated. On the other hand, young learners, that is to say students from 12 years old, are still less self-conscious than adults, but they are very curious. Thus, songs and games are an efficient way to attract their attention, and as with children, exposure is more important than language use (Willis, 1996).

To sum up, task based learning can be considered as a valid method to teach a foreign language. In particular, it entails many advantages for learners. First of



all, they experience realistic conversation, practicing many different functions, such as questions, answers, and turns to speak. Moreover, they have the opportunity to try to use the foreign language without worrying of errors. In this way, they develop communication skills and strategies (Willis, 1996).

However, Skehan (1996) recognizes some problems related to the practice of task based learning. In his opinion, the fact that communication is focused on meaning can imply difficulties for some students, who may not be able to focus on the forms they use. Moreover, students have to speak under time pressure, but often they are not able to think about how to say something while they are saying it. For this reason, the conversation might become ‘lexically-driven’ (Skehan, 1996), that is to say learners may use lexical chunks rather than sentences. The solution proposed by Skehan (1996) is to try to achieve a balance between attention to language and to content when creating a task. Again, the importance to choose a task with a difficulty that is suitable to the students who have to perform it is underlined. Moreover, Ellis (1997) suggests that tasks should be used to acquire control over forms that students have already acquired, rather than new language structures, and Seedhouse (1999) adds that tasks should be considered as a part of a general approach to teach English that is based on them, and not as the main aim of teaching.

## **2.7 What grammar should be taught and how**

In this chapter the role of grammar in foreign language teaching has been investigated. In particular, what is meant by grammar has been explained, and several methods to teach foreign language have been presented, in order to

introduce the important dichotomy between focus on forms and focus on meaning and arrive then to the possible solution of focus on form. Finally, task based learning has been described as an applicable method, which can integrate communication and grammar teaching. In this regard, an overview of the criteria to choose which grammar structures should be taught, and when and how they should be presented will be provided in this section.

As the premise of task based learning is that formal instruction has an important role in foreign language teaching, another problem arises in its application, that is how teachers should decide what structures to teach and in what sequence they should organize them. Duso (2007), for instance, states that teachers should decide to teach those forms that are useful to communicate, as realistic language is the target of instruction. In fact, a pedagogical grammar aims first of all for the development of learners' communicative ability (Rutherford, 1990).

Ellis (1997) proposes that a balance between what is learnable and what is problematic should be found. In order to do so, he lists some aspects which should be considered in the choice of the forms to be explained. First of all, non salient structures need instruction, that is to say those structures that are not easily recognizable in input. Moreover, less frequent forms should be explained, as much as redundant features, which are usually in contexts 'where their meaning is signaled by something else' (Ellis, 1997), such as the -s of the third person singular in English verbs. In addition, instruction should be provided of structures with a large scope, which means that a rule applies to many items, and high reliability, that is it presents few exceptions. Ellis (1997)

adds that marked features should be taught explicitly, while there is no consent about language complexity; some researchers think that instruction should focus on simple forms, while others assert that complex structures are worth explaining. Moreover, instruction should not concentrate only on those structures that may imply transfer from the first language, and it is efficient only when the learner is ready to acquire the forms involved (Ellis, 1997). Duso (2007) adds the criterion of generality, which implies that more general rules should be explained before specific ones, and affirms that the choice of the linguistic elements to teach should always consider learners' needs. In fact, following students' needs allows them to be more motivated to learn. In addition, formal instruction should respect learners' beliefs about language, as they influence the effectiveness of their learning, and attitudes, as interest plays a fundamental role in acquisition (Farjami, 2011).

Batstone and Ellis (2009) suggest that the choice of the order in which grammar features should be taught is not enough; what is necessary is the definition of some general principles, which allow teachers to decide what procedures to use in language teaching. In particular, they distinguish between three different principles: the given-to-new principle, the awareness principle and the real condition principle. The first principle aims to make the learner able to link the form and meaning or function of a language structure, exploiting the student's knowledge of the world, which acts as a resource to perceive that something is new. In this way, new meanings of a known form, or new forms to express familiar meaning can be discovered during activities. The awareness principle, instead, has the goal to make learners conscious of

specific grammar features. Thus, instruction should draw students' attention to grammar forms within input, so that they can recognize their meaning and acquire control over them. Finally, the real condition principle is based on an idea of grammar as communicative tool, thus learners are provided with occasions to practice conversation in real-life situations, while instruction is provided in the form of feedback.

To sum up, formal instruction should be organized in a gradual and cyclical order, which respects the natural order of acquisition and avoids forgetting of acquired structures (Duso, 2007). Moreover, it should follow an implicational sequence, in which a stage must have been acquired before the next can be taught. To achieve this goal, great responsibility is left to teachers, who have not only to decide which structures to present, and in which order, but also to choose which principles to follow to teach a foreign language. Moreover, when focusing on form, they have to make a decision about the inductive or deductive approach to use, and the explicit or implicit approach to apply. Finally, they have to select which kind of feedback is suitable to every different situation (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). In conclusion, teachers should be aware of their role in language teaching and behave accordingly, inquiring about theories on language teaching and new methods to adopt and to adapt. In fact, it is important to remember that learners' success in the acquisition of a foreign language depends also on their teachers' work.



## CHAPTER 3

### INVESTIGATING GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION IN PRACTICE

In this chapter a research project on the role of grammar in foreign language teaching will be presented. In particular, this research bases itself on two main points: the extent to which teachers rely on grammar in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners, and the effectiveness of task based learning in particular teaching contexts. The starting point of this research are the observations I have made during my collaboration with an association that provides weak secondary school students with extra lessons on the main school subjects, in order to help them achieve an acceptable level. This activity is known in the Italian context as *doposcuola*. In particular, I have been teaching English to students aged 10-11 for two years. Lessons are organized after school and are offered to groups of from five to eight students, so that it is possible for educators to devote enough time to each student and to pay attention to their needs and difficulties. During this experience I have noticed that learners who have the greatest difficulties in language acquisition are unable to express themselves in the foreign language and even to understand it. Moreover, after a deeper analysis of their abilities, I have discovered that most of them have great gaps in English grammar, and thus I have wondered if my students' low proficiency in English can be ascribed to their poor knowledge of grammar.

Furthermore, last December I had a two months experience of teacher training in the same secondary school in which I'm carrying out the activity of *doposcuola*. During this period I collaborated with an English teacher who works with students of 10 to 14 years old, and I met other English teachers at the same school. In this way, I had the possibility to observe different teaching styles and methods, and to compare my experience with that of expert teachers about the characteristics and problems of teaching English as a foreign language in secondary school. Thus, starting from these two important experiences, I decided to investigate some issues related to EFL teaching and, in particular, to the role that grammar has in it. My research obviously has some limits, as it is part of a student's final dissertation, rather than of a long term study conducted by a professional researcher. However, it aims to give a modest contribution on the controversial issue of grammar teaching, but it might also have practical implications, as it has been helpful to me and may be helpful to other educators to understand how to approach English teaching, in order to help students with difficulties and to improve their proficiency.

Before analyzing the research project in detail, an overview of the main research methods in applied linguistics is worth offering. In particular, the distinction made by Dörnyei (2007) between quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research will be approached. Quantitative research is based mainly on numerical data, which are usually analyzed with the use of statistics. For this reason, it requires a large sample in order to be reliable and the researcher must follow standard procedures of investigation and analysis, in order to be objective. However, the choice of the sample is not at all easy, as it should be accessible and representative at the same time, and its subgroups must be identified. Questionnaires are an example of the

instruments used in quantitative research, even if they often mix quantitative and open-ended questions, in order to avoid the risk of producing superficial results (Dörney, 2007).

On the contrary, qualitative research makes use of non-numerical data, which are often spoken data that are recorded and then analyzed, such as interviews. This research method is based on researchers' subjectivity, as they have the important task of interpreting data according to their experience and intuitions. Qualitative research usually takes place in natural settings, and thus complete immersion in the studied environment is necessary; its main characteristics are flexibility and subjectivity, as its data are open to many interpretations. The advantages of this method are its suitability to both new phenomena and 'further research' (Dörney, 2007), which explores the reasons why some phenomena occur; the possibility to make its results more convincing, as there is more to write to describe it, while quantitative research is limited by charts, numbers and graphics; and its flexibility, which allows the researcher to exploit changes and unexpected events during the research. However, qualitative research is also time consuming; it implies the risk of the researcher's influence in the interpretations of data, and the small size of the sample used makes its results not applicable to everyone. Consequently, the important criterion to make qualitative research reliable is to guarantee the maximum variation in the choice of sampling, as regards for example age, level of proficiency, etc.; on the other hand, one can decide to analyze critical or extreme cases, which represent a typical experience as regards the research focus (Dörney, 2007).

Finally, mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative methods, using for instance questionnaires followed by interviews, in order to understand



better some aspects that emerge from the participants' answers. In this way, this method shows more strengths and less weaknesses than the two different approaches adopted separately. Moreover, it may prove to be more valid, as it provides more reliable evidence than the other methods, and thus allows a better understanding of complex phenomena (Dörnyei, 2007).

Dörnyei (2007) underlines that the choice of the best method to use is a difficult and not universal one. In particular, he suggests that every researcher should choose the method that best suits his/her project, considering its audience, some practical considerations such as the availability of resources and sample, and personal experience with the research method. Dörnyei's most important recommendation is to choose a pragmatic method, with which the researcher feels comfortable. In this way, he/she will be able to exploit creativity and curiosity within a systematic approach. As regards this project, the research and analysis methods will be explained within the "method" section of each part.

### **3.1 Questionnaires for teachers**

The first part of this research consists in a questionnaire that has been administered to secondary school English teachers. The aim was to investigate teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the role of grammar in teaching English as a foreign language. In fact, the literature review in the preceding chapters has demonstrated that teachers' decisions play a fundamental role in learners' foreign language acquisition, and thus their position towards formal instruction is worth analyzing in order to provide an overview of how Italian students at a beginner or intermediate level acquire languages. Moreover, this research tries to provide evidence of the theories on

language acquisition explained before, in which formal instruction is presented as an important part of language teaching, such as Long's focus on form. To do so, a comparison between teachers of Italian and international schools has been made, in order to understand whether a different teaching context implies a different role of grammar in language teaching.

The questions that this first part of the research tries to answer are: what is Italian teachers' attitude towards grammar instruction? How is this attitude reflected in their teaching approach? Are there any differences between Italian and native speaker teachers? Does formal instruction lose its prominent role in a different teaching context, such as international schools?

### *3.1.1 Method*

The research is based on a typical quantitative instrument, the questionnaire. However, the data have been analyzed qualitatively, as the sample was quite small and the aim of the investigation is to provide a description of some cases, which are representative of the focus of the research.

The participants are teachers from two different secondary schools. The first is an Italian secondary school in Cittadella (PD), which is a state school. Six teachers of this school took part in this project. Five of them are Italian, while only one teacher is a native speaker. They are all experienced teachers, who have been teaching English for an average of 20 years. Moreover, all of them have not always taught English to students aged 11-14, as three of them have worked with younger children, while the other three have experienced English teaching with students of 14 to 19 years old and adults. In addition, all of them have attended refresher courses during

their careers, and three of them have completed a part of their training abroad, except from the native speaker teacher, who did her whole training in England and Turkey. The second school is a private English International school in Rosà (VI). It is attended by students from 5 to 14 years old and it provides them with continual exposure to the foreign language. In fact, not only is English teaching strengthened, but also other important subjects are taught in English. In addition, the foreign language is used by children and teachers during all the extra activities. Two teachers from this school, who work with students of the secondary school, are involved in this research. One of them is Italian, and she has never attended a training course abroad, while the other teacher is a native speaker and has completed her whole education in Canada. Both teachers are less experienced than those of the Italian school, as they have been teaching English respectively for 8 and 13 years, and they have always worked with students aged 11-14. Moreover, one of them has never attended refresher courses, while the other did so abroad.

The instrument used to carry out this research is a questionnaire, which consists of 45 questions about personal experiences as teachers, the importance of grammar instruction, the teaching methods adopted, communication activities, the treatment of errors, syllabus and time organization, and students' assessment (see Appendix). Most of the items are likert-scales, but there are also open-ended questions, which investigate details of teachers' personal experience, or the reasons for their answers about some important issues. Finally, some multiple-choice questions have been used to show quantitative data, such as the average time of a lesson that teachers devote to one activity or another. As regards the Italian school, questionnaires were administered personally to the teachers after the project had been explained orally, as

I had the possibility to meet them every day during my teacher training. On the other hand, in the English school the research was presented to the person responsible for the English teachers, who then administered the questionnaire to them. All the participants completed the questionnaire autonomously and then returned it in an average time of two weeks.

### *3.1.2 Results*

The results of the questionnaires administered to the teachers of the Italian school in question will be dealt with separately from those emerging from the questionnaires compiled by the teachers of the International school in Rosà. This procedure will allow me to present a clearer analysis of the findings, while a comparison of the attitudes of the teachers of the two schools will be dealt with in the following section.

As regards the **importance of grammar**, three teachers from the Italian school agree on the need for grammar instruction in EFL teaching, and two of them declare they are neutral about this issue, so that only one person assumes a position against the important role of grammar teaching. In particular, these teachers strongly agree that formal instruction helps the improvement of accuracy in communication, even if they admit that real-life communication can take place without broad grammatical knowledge. On the other hand, there is a general agreement on the belief that English can be taught through communicative activities, which do not focus on forms, and that the use of the foreign language can lead to acquisition. Furthermore, half of the teachers questioned think that a good grounding in grammar can contribute to the acquisition of writing and speaking skills, while the other half is neutral. On the other hand, there is both agreement and disagreement on the importance of grammar in the

development of reading and listening abilities. Moreover, the reactions to the statement that the best way to teach a foreign language is to provide students with grammar instruction first are very different. The questionnaires present five different answers given by six teachers; among them, three people express a certain disagreement, but there are also two positive answers (one teacher agrees, and one strongly agrees). The answers to the most significant questions about this issue have been reported in the chart below.

<b>QUESTIONS</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
6. Students at a beginner/intermediate level need to learn grammar to acquire a foreign language	2	1	2	1	/
7. The best way to introduce students to a foreign language is to provide them with grammar instruction first of all	1	1	1	2	1
8. English can be taught effectively through a communicative approach that focuses on the conveyance of the meaning and not on the form	2	2	2	/	/
10. Grammar teaching helps students to learn how to use the foreign language to communicate accurately	4	1	1	/	/
12. My students can acquire the skills of writing and speaking more effectively if they have a good grounding in grammar	3	/	3	/	/
13. My students can acquire the skills of reading and listening more effectively if they have a good grounding in grammar	1	1	1	2	/

Examining the single questionnaires, it comes to the surface that those teachers who advocate the importance of grammar instruction also consider it as the main means to teach English. In fact, they agree on its influence on the improvement of accuracy and language skills. Nevertheless, they admit the efficacy of the communicative approach and of the use of English to make students acquire the foreign language. On the other hand, the three teachers who deny the fact that grammar has a central role in English teaching show a higher degree of coherence, as they support communicative activities and the use of foreign language, and at the same time affirm that grammar is not the best means to teach a foreign language and it does not contribute to language skills acquisition. Nonetheless, two of them recognize the need for formal instruction in order to improve learners' accuracy.

The analysis of the results regarding **teaching methods** reveals a great difference in the amount of time that teachers devote to explicit grammar instruction: two people affirm they devote from 50% to 80% of a lesson to focus on forms; other two use from 20% to 50% of the lessons; and the last two teachers devote less than the 20% of a lesson to grammar teaching. The same phenomenon is to be found in the percentage of a lesson that teachers devote to spoken interaction between students.

In this section of the questionnaire, a strong agreement on the use of exercises after the explanation of a grammar structure emerges. Moreover, the teachers generally agree on the importance of the time left to students in order to let them communicate freely, even if this does not make grammar unnecessary for the acquisition of proficiency in the foreign language. In addition, explicit instruction on grammar features is supported by half of the questioned teachers, and only one of them disagrees on its importance. However, it is not clear if focus on specific forms during

lessons is considered as valid to raise accuracy in the use of English, even if in the previous section of the questionnaire all the teachers agreed on the importance of grammar knowledge to allow accuracy in communication. This is clearly a contradiction that is difficult to explain.

As has been said before, the six questioned teachers devote different amounts of time to students' spoken interaction. However, all teachers except one find it difficult to carry out communicative activities, but it is important to underline that the only teacher who does not find problems with this kind of lessons is a native-speaker, who usually collaborates with other teachers of this school to organize communicative lessons for students for limited periods of time. The main reasons for the difficulties in the organization of communicative activities listed by teachers are: the fact that classes are big, so it is quite impossible for the teacher to monitor the groups or pairs of students, who often share information without actually completing the tasks; that students are at a low level, and thus they may not speak, as they are afraid of making mistakes, or on the contrary pair work might become very noisy, as students start using Italian language to interact; that there is little time to propose communicative activities; and that it is difficult to find motivating settings that help learners producing output in the foreign language.

In addition, the majority of teachers declare that their students are not willing to communicate in English during lessons, but only two of them can state that they have found effective methods to encourage learners to express themselves, while two of them choose the neutral answer. These teachers explain that they usually create an environment in which students' attention is drawn to the product, rather than to the form of their utterances. Moreover, they look for meaningful, and thus enjoyable

topics to talk about, and let learners speak about their personal experiences exchanging information with their peers, or ask them to look for new vocabulary on a specific topic.

As regards pair work, all teachers do this type of activity almost once in a month, but three of them try to carry it out more than twice a month. Half of them think pair work is time consuming, but half does not. Moreover, three out of six teachers find that pair work is useful for students to learn how to use English effectively, while the rest of them declare they are neutral about this issue. Finally, the majority of the teachers, but not all of them, consider their students able to cooperate in pair work activities.

Speaking about tasks, most teachers recognize that grammar instruction and communicative activities involving spoken or written comprehension should not be treated as separate entities, and thus grammar topics can be introduced through communicative activities and they should be embedded in wider tasks. However, teachers' opinions differ about the role of grammar instruction within communicative tasks. In fact, two of them think it is necessary to make students focus on form and not only on meaning, while other two state that it is not.

The last issue of this section was the explanation of new grammar structures. There is general agreement or neutrality on the use of explicit instruction for every new feature encountered by students during activities. However, teachers are generally of the same opinion about the usefulness of providing students with examples of new grammar structures before they had explicit instruction on them. In addition, only half of the teachers respect learners' developmental readiness, avoiding for instance explaining structures that students are not ready to acquire, while the rest of them



also provide learners with exposure to complex structures. The results analyzed above have been summarized in the following chart, which contains the answers to some interesting questions about teaching methods.

<b>QUESTIONS</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
16. Focus on specific grammatical forms during lessons raises the level of accuracy in the spoken/written use of English	1	1	3	3	/
17. The explanation of a specific grammar structure is always followed by exercises in my English lessons	2	3	/	1	/
18. English is acquired proficiently if students are encouraged to communicate freely	2	1	3	/	/
19. The communicative use of English and continuous exposure to the language make grammar instruction unnecessary for learning the language proficiently	/	/	3	2	1
21. I've found some effective methods to encourage my students to communicate in English	2	/	2	/	1
23. Effective communicative activities are difficult to carry out	2	3	/	/	1
24. Pair work is too time consuming, so it isn't possible to do it often	/	3	/	2	1
25. Pair work is useful to learn how to use English effectively	1	2	3	/	/
28. It is useful to introduce grammatical topics through communicative activities	/	4	1	1	/

QUESTIONS	SA	A	N	D	SD
30. If I organize a lesson starting with a communicative task, my students won't then be able to focus effectively on the grammatical structures they've used without receiving explicit instruction on them	1	1	2	/	2
31. Grammar instruction is independent from activities that involve communication or spoken/written comprehension	/	1	2	1	2
32. Explicit grammar instruction should be embedded in a concrete and wider task	2	3	1	/	/
35. I provide my students with grammar instruction only if I think they're ready to acquire the language feature in question and I avoid explaining structures that are too complex for their level	1	2	/	1	2

Again, when the answers of the single teachers are analyzed, we can see that teachers who support grammar generally rely on explicit instruction. In fact, they recognize the importance of communication, but affirm that grammar and exercises are necessary. In their opinion, grammar can be embedded in communicative tasks, but instruction still has an important role in them. Among them, the native-speaker teacher gives total support to communicative activities and pair work, but again her position may be linked to the kind of lessons she usually carries out.

On the other hand, teachers who rely less on grammar recognize the importance of communicative activities and tasks, but yet they have some difficulties in carrying them out and devote little time to them in their lessons. Only one of these teachers rejects focus on forms and organizes communicative activities, tasks and pair work quite often.

**Error treatment** and **assessment** are other two issues that have been investigated in the questionnaire. The majority of teachers acknowledge the risk of explicit feedback to affect students will of communicate, and the effectiveness of implicit feedback in the improvement of learners' proficiency. In fact, there is a certain disagreement on the use of explicit feedback during oral production, but there is also a great variety in the belief that errors are noticed by students when implicit feedback is provided. In fact, each teacher gave a different answer about this issue, except two of them, who agree with the statement. Moreover, most teachers maintain that students' language proficiency can be assessed through tests involving written comprehension and production, rather than grammar exercises. In their opinion, this is possible because: writing includes grammar use, and thus correctness can be assessed; written comprehension and production involve more structures at the same time, and thus they offer a better understanding of the student's proficiency; and it is possible to assess students' competences evaluating the strategies and abilities they use in solving problems. On the contrary, two teachers do not consider written comprehension and production enough to evaluate students' proficiency, as students often copy answers from the text, or they are miscarried by translation into Italian, which they often do while reading. Moreover, one of them states that grammar knowledge is the fundamental basis of reading and writing skills, without which students cannot produce even the simplest message. Furthermore, teachers' opinion about the necessity to assess grammar is split into three tendencies: two teachers agree with this necessity, two disagree and two are neutral. This variability reflects on the percentage of a test that concerns grammar exercises on average, which shifts from 30 to 80%. In particular, the explanation of the native-speaker teacher about

assessment is very interesting. In fact, she points out that grammar is not necessary if the aim is to evaluate effective communication, while it can be useful when a single grammar point has to be emphasized. However, this teacher argues that in Italian schools teachers usually do tests with the aim to give students a mark in order to evaluate them, while a test should, in her opinion, show learners where they are going wrong and which is their level. The following chart presents some data concerning the issues analyzed above.

<b>QUESTIONS</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
37. Explicit feedback on students' errors can affect their will to communicate	/	5	/	1	/
38. Correcting students without stressing their errors but proposing a correct version of the utterance (implicit feedback) is an effective way to improve their proficiency	3	2	/	1	/
39. Students may not understand or notice their errors when implicit feedback is provided	1	2	1	1	1
45. Assessing grammar is fundamental to evaluate students' level of acquisition of the language	1	1	2	2	/

From a deeper analysis of this issues, it emerges that only one teacher supports both kinds of feedback, while another one is satisfied neither of explicit nor of implicit feedback, as the former can affect communication, and the latter may not be noticed by students. However, the majority of questioned teachers prefer correcting students' mistakes implicitly, even if two of them are aware that learners may not notice errors in this way.

Moreover, among those teachers who consider grammar instruction as important in English teaching, not all consider it fundamental in assessment. In particular, one teacher asserts that grammar knowledge is worth assessing; she devotes 80% of her tests to it and considers tests based on written comprehension and production not efficient. Another one agrees on the importance of grammar in her tests, which consists of 50% of exercises on forms, but she also recognizes the validity of writing and reading tests to assess proficiency. Finally, the native-speaker teacher prefers comprehension-based and production-based tests, and devotes only 30% of her tests to grammar. The same phenomenon occurs among teachers who rely less on grammar instruction. In fact, two of them believe in the effectiveness of tests based on written comprehension and production, but one does not usually assess grammar, while the other prepares tests which consist for 80% of grammar exercises. The third teacher also devotes 50% of tests to grammar, while she does not rely on writing and reading skills to evaluate students' level.

The last investigated topic is **syllabus and time organization**. Excluding the neutral answers, which are not very significant, the questionnaires show that the majority of teachers think that they are able to organize their time in order to propose alternative lessons, such as those including communicative activities, but they also feel some pressure from syllabus constraints. On the contrary, they have different opinions about the classroom environment in which they work, as two of them find it difficult to carry out communicative activities in it, while other two do not have such problems. The results about these issues are showed in the chart below.

QUESTIONS	SA	A	N	D	SD
40. Syllabus constraints prevent me from organizing alternative lessons based e.g. on communicative tasks	/	2	3	/	1
42. The environment of an average classroom makes it difficult for me to carry out communicative tasks	1	1	2	2	/

Furthermore, it is interesting to highlight that teachers who do not advocate assessment through written comprehension and production are those who feel more pressure in time organization and consider classroom environment not suitable to communicative tasks. On the contrary, the other teachers affirm to be able to cope with time organization and are satisfied (2 people) or quite satisfied (2 people) of the class in which they teach.

Now the results of the questionnaires administered to the teachers of the English International school in Rosà will be analyzed. It is important to remember that in this school only two teachers were questioned. However, even if the sample of this research is quite small, the answers of these two teachers provide interesting issues to discuss, in particular when compared to those emerging from the results of the investigation in the Italian school.

A regards the **importance of grammar**, the teachers questioned agree both on the usefulness of grammar teaching in order to improve students' accuracy and language skills, and on the necessity to use the foreign language and a communicative approach to teach English effectively. The only point in which they disagree is the possibility for real-life communication to take place without broad grammatical knowledge: the Italian teacher agree with this statement, while the Canadian one does not. The following chart contains the results that have just been presented.

QUESTIONS	SA	A	N	D	SD
8. English can be taught effectively through a communicative approach that focuses on the conveyance of the meaning and not on the form	/	1	1	/	/
9. Students acquire a foreign language using it, not learning it through rules and examples created ad hoc	/	2	/	/	/
10. Grammar teaching helps students to learn how to use the foreign language to communicate accurately	1	1	/	/	/
11. Real-life communication can take place effectively even without broad grammatical knowledge	/	1	/	1	/
12. My students can acquire the skills of writing and speaking more effectively if they have a good grounding in grammar	/	2	/	/	/
13. My students can acquire the skills of reading and listening more effectively if they have a good grounding in grammar	/	2	/	/	/

A general agreement between the two teachers is also to be noticed in the section about **teaching methods**. In fact, they both recognize the need for explicit instruction followed by exercises on grammar structures during lessons, but they also judge communication activities as valid. As a consequence, they usually devote from 50 to 80% of their lesson to formal instruction, and the rest of it to spoken interaction between students. Moreover, they affirm that they work in an environment that allows them to carry out communicative activities, which in their opinion are not difficult to organize, and they believe that they have found some effective methods to

encourage students to communicate in English. In particular, they try to deal with topics that focus on their students' age and interests, in order to capture their attention, and they use instruments like articles and games. Pair work is also seen as useful to teach an effective use of the foreign language, even if one of the teachers thinks that it is too time consuming, and thus organizes it only twice or three times a year.

In addition, tasks and communicative activities are considered valid devices to introduce new grammar structures and a certain focus on forms is seen as possible even during this lessons. In fact, the two teachers recognize that grammar instruction and communicative or comprehension-based activities are linked, and thus it is a good solution to embed grammar instruction in concrete tasks. Moreover, both teachers usually let their students find examples of new grammar rules before they received instruction on them, and provide formal instruction on complex structures when they find them during activities, even if students may not be ready to acquire them. The most significant questions about these issues are reported in the following chart together with the corresponding answers.

QUESTIONS	SA	A	N	D	SD
15. My students can internalize grammar structures more effectively if rules are presented explicitly	1	1	/	/	/
17. The explanation of a specific grammar structure is always followed by exercises in my English lessons	2	/	/	/	/
19. The communicative use of English and continuous exposure to the language make grammar instruction unnecessary for learning the language proficiently	/	/	/	2	/



QUESTIONS	SA	A	N	D	SD
20. My students are willing to communicate in English in the classroom	1	1	/	/	/
21. I've found some effective methods to encourage my students to communicate in English	2	/	/	/	/
24. Pair work is too time consuming, so it isn't possible to do it often	/	1	/	1	/
29. The use of language to complete a specific task can help my students to acquire linguistic features	1	1	/	/	/
30. If I organize a lesson starting with a communicative task, my students won't then be able to focus effectively on the grammatical structures they've used without receiving explicit instruction on them	/	/	/	1	1
34. It is good for students to find examples of new grammar structures before they have had explicit instruction on them	/	1	1	/	/
35. I provide my students with grammar instruction only if I think they're ready to acquire the language feature in question and I avoid explaining structures that are too complex for their level	/	/	/	2	/

As regards **error treatment** and **assessment**, the interviewees are in favour of explicit feedback, but only one of them thinks that it does not affect students' will to communicate. On the contrary, the other teacher is aware of this risk but she accepts it, as she finds explicit feedback useful. The two teachers support also implicit feedback, even if one of them has some doubts about students' capability to notice errors when they are corrected implicitly. On the other hand, the questioned teachers

disagree on assessment methods. In fact, the Italian teacher believes that it is fundamental to assess grammar, and in fact she devotes 100% of her tests to grammar exercises. Moreover, she does not think that tests involving written comprehension and production can assess students' language proficiency, as she considers grammar as the basis of comprehension and production. On the contrary, the Canadian teacher relies on comprehension- and production-based tests, because she thinks that her students are at a very good level in English, as most of them have attended a bilingual school since they were five, and thus they are able to cope with this kind of tests. However, this teacher does not underestimate the importance of grammar. In fact, 80% of her tests usually concerns grammar exercises. The data concerning these issues are presented in the following chart.

QUESTIONS	SA	A	N	D	SD
37. Explicit feedback on students' errors can affect their will to communicate	/	1	/	/	1
38. Correcting students without stressing their errors but proposing a correct version of the utterance (implicit feedback) is an effective way to improve their proficiency	2	/	/	/	/
39. Students may not understand or notice their errors when implicit feedback is provided	/	1	/	1	/
45. Assessing grammar is fundamental to evaluate students' level of acquisition of the language	1	/	1	/	/

Finally, the section in which the greatest difference from teachers of the Italian school emerges is that of **syllabus and time organization**. In fact, the teachers of the

English school claim they do not feel any pressure from syllabus constraints. Moreover, they state they are able to cope with time organization in order to propose different types of lessons, and they find the classroom environment in which they work suitable to the performance of communicative activities without problems. The results are presented in the following chart.

<b>QUESTIONS</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
41. I can cope easily with time organization and I'm able to include different types of lessons in my syllabus	1	1	/	/	/
42. The environment of an average classroom makes it difficult for me to carry out communicative tasks	/	/	/	2	/

The possible reasons of this and other differences will be dealt with in the next section of this paragraph.

### *3.1.3 Discussion*

Some observations, which are interesting for this research, can be made starting from the results described above. For example, we can see that the attitude towards grammar is not homogeneous among the teachers of the Italian school, as they are divided into two different tendencies, one relying more and the other less on formal instruction in EFL teaching. However, it is important to point out that only one teacher completely rejects explicit grammar instruction, while the others recognize to different extents that formal instruction has an important role, in particular for the improvement of accuracy in communication.

Moreover, some teachers who support the communicative approach and the use of language to acquire it demonstrate to be unable to carry out communicative activities during their lessons. Thus, their idea of foreign language teaching does not correspond to what they usually carry out during their lessons. This may depend on the fact that teachers have not enough time to organize activities which sometimes turn out to be time consuming, or on the classroom environment in which they have to work, as they often have to deal with students who are not willing to communicate in English.

On the contrary, the teachers at the English International school recognize the importance of the communicative approach and they are also able to cope with time and syllabus constraints in order to create alternative communicative lessons, in the performance of which they do not find any difficulty. Certainly, these teachers work in a completely different classroom environment. In fact, their students have attended a bilingual school since they were very young, and thus are used to communicate in English and often enjoy doing it. Moreover, as it is a private and international school, teachers have more freedom in the organization of their lessons, and even if they have to follow national syllabi, they can use different approaches and methods without being pressed.

In addition, what is interesting to point out is that even if the teachers of the English school support communicative activities and work in a particular environment in which spoken interaction is always encouraged, they do not underestimate the role of formal instruction. On the contrary, they make wide use of grammar teaching and consider it as fundamental as communication.

In general, it can be said that teachers of the English International school seem to have a more homogeneous attitude towards the role of grammar in language teaching, even if they still have some doubt as regards, for example, pair work and assessment of proficiency. On the other hand, the answers of the teachers of the Italian school reflect more contradictions (e.g. their attitude towards feedback; the importance of grammar for accuracy, and at the same time the doubts about the effectiveness of focus on forms; the importance of the communicative approach, which is not put in concrete form). This may show a lack of awareness of the issues in the teachers questioned, who may not know what possibilities they have in choosing one approach or the other. On the other hand, this sort of incoherence may be the result of syllabus constraints and classroom environment, which prevent even the most willing teacher to do something different from traditional lessons. Finally, the results might offer evidence of the fact that these teachers are adopting an eclectic approach, which combines different methods and types of activities. However, if this is the case, teachers do not seem to be completely aware of it.

In conclusion, teachers of both schools seem to agree, even if to different extents, on the importance of the role of grammar instruction in English teaching. Moreover, they all seem to be in favour of the adoption of what Long (1991) called ‘focus on form’, even if in different ways and with a different degree of awareness. In particular, the general tendency is to maintain grammar instruction in EFL lessons, but to embed it in wider activities, which preferably include communicative tasks and spoken interaction. However, if this is teachers’ widespread attitude, the emerging truth is that it is not always applicable, in particular in the context of Italian state schools.

### 3.2 Quasi-experimental study on students

The second part of my study aims at investigating whether young students who show particular difficulties in learning or lacks in language proficiency can gain some benefit from task based learning, which has been presented in the previous chapter as a valid approach to apply focus on form in English lessons. The quasi-experimental study consists of two lessons concerning a topic that students had already studied with their own English teachers: the family. Thus, the goal of the task was to make students acquire control over structures they already knew, rather than to help them learn something new. In particular, it involved lexis about the family and listening and speaking skills. Moreover, the task aimed at making students achieve and perform some abilities, such as understanding basic words and phrases about the family, understanding simple questions about themselves and their family, asking and answering simple questions about their family, asking for someone's name and introducing a person they knew to someone else. In addition, the grammar structures involved in the performance of the task, and thus in the final activities, which focused on language form, were the interrogative form of the verbs *to be* and *have got*, *wh-* questions and the possessive.

As has already been said in the first section of this chapter, my interest in the topic of this study comes from my work in the *doposcuola* activity, during which I have to work with students with great problems with English language knowledge and difficulties in learning in general. Consequently, I asked myself how I could help these students to learn English proficiently and to fill some of the gaps they have in grammar, most of all. I knew that task-based learning could be a good solution for ordinary students, in order to teach grammar together with language skills

effectively, but I had some doubts about the success that this method could have on my students. Consequently, I decided to investigate this issue, in order to have a clearer idea on the topic and to give a contribution to my study on the role of grammar in EFL teaching.

### *3.2.1 Method*

The participants in this study are two small groups of students from different classes of the first year of the secondary school in Cittadella, the same school in which teachers who have been questioned about the role of grammar in EFL teaching work. All the students were taking part in after school classes in the 2012-2013 school year, during which they are provided with lessons on the school subjects in which they are weak, in order to help them to study in a more effective way and to fill their gaps in those subjects. Lessons take place once a week, on Thursday afternoon, from the beginning of November to the end of May; they last one hour and half and are conducted by people who are not the students' teachers. In particular, the investigated students are attending English lessons. Obviously, they have a low language proficiency, and difficulties both in the communicative and formal aspects of language learning. However, it is important to underline that these students have not been found to be suffering from Specific Learning Disorders, and thus they are not followed by a remedial teacher in class. More simply, they have some difficulties in studying the language. Some of them are hyperactive children, others suffer from slight concentration disorders; in addition, many others are not motivated students, who are not able, or not willing, to study on their own. The two groups consist

respectively of five and four students, and in each group there are two students from the same class.

The study consists mainly of three parts: a pre-task to introduce the vocabulary needed by students; a communicative task divided in four parts; and two activities that focus on the language structures used by students during the task.

In the pre-task, students had to take part in a brainstorming activity, in which they listed all the words concerning the family that came into their mind. In the meantime, I wrote those words in open order on the blackboard. When students finished their list, I helped them to find important missing words, and then in pairs they had to divide all the terms written on the blackboard in two lists: close family and extended family. The meaning of the two categories was not explained in greater detail, and students were left free to interpret them.

After the students compared the lists and created a common version, the task began. In the first part, students had to listen to the fictional description of the families of two friends, called Lucy and Kate, which I read aloud. The first time they listened, students had a list with some characters' first names, which they had to match to the family they belong to. Then they listened to the story again, they checked their answers and then compared them with those of a peer. Afterwards, students listened to the description a third time, during which they had to fill in the gaps of the family tree of one of the families described in the text, the Smiths. Again, they checked their answers with a peer. In the third part of the task, students worked in pairs. They had to complete the family tree of the other family, the Browns, as an information gap activity. In particular, each of the components of the pair had the figure of the family tree with some missing information. Obviously, the missing names of one of the



students were different from those of their peer. Students had to fill in the gaps in order to complete the family tree, by asking their peer for information, starting from the names they had on the family tree and using the vocabulary concerning the family. For example, they could ask their peer: “Who is Mark’s dad?” or “Who is John’s sister?”. At the end of the activity, each pair of students compared their family tree with the rest of the group. Finally, students performed an oral activity in pairs, in which they had to ask and answer questions about their own family. After a first part in which they created questions on their own, they were provided with written questions to ask their peers. At the end of the conversation, they reported some of their peer’s answers to the rest of the group.

In the third part of the study, students concentrated on form-focused activities, which focused on the interrogative form of the verbs *to be* and *have got*, on *wh-* questions and on the possessive. In particular, students were provided with a list in which the first names of the characters of the description were mentioned in pairs (e.g. Helen–Kate), and they had to write sentences in which they explained the relationship between the two characters, using the possessive and the vocabulary concerning family (e.g. Helen is Kate’s grandmother). In order to find out the right relationships, student could look at the family trees they completed during the task. In the second activity, each student was given some cards with parts of two different questions related to the story written on them. The aim of the activity was to match the cards in order to form two complete questions, write them down and answer them on the basis of what students had listened to during the task.

These three parts of the study were divided into two different lessons, depending on the time students needed to complete them. The activities were created especially for

the study to which they contribute, so that it was impossible that students had already encountered them in their books, even if the kinds of exercises proposed are similar to those they deal with in class. The activities have been described here in detail, and the exercises proposed to students during the entire task cycle are to be found in the appendix.

### *3.2.2 Results*

In this section the way in which students carried out the various activities will be described. In particular, the work of the two groups will be analyzed separately, in order to give a clearer idea of their performance of the task cycle.

The students of the first group demonstrated a good knowledge of the vocabulary about the family in the pre-task, as they remembered a lot of words and were able to complete the lists on their own. However, the comparison with a peer was carried out superficially and very quickly. In fact, they compared the lists and corrected the answers that were different from their peer's ones, without thinking about their errors. Moreover, some students did not even correct their errors or ask themselves why they made them. Consequently, a guided comparison turned out to be necessary: I asked one pair to read their list, and then asked other students whether they noticed some differences, why they had put some words in a different list, and which was the best solution in their opinion. In this way, students corrected their errors consciously and thought about their choices.

As regards listening comprehension during the task, it is interesting to say that since I did not use a recorded text, but I read the description aloud, I had the possibility to give emphasis to the reading and make it more understandable. This was necessary,

in my opinion, as the students are not used to carry out listening activities in class and their low level could have affected the entire outcome of the task. As a consequence, I read the text quite slowly the first time, while the second time I stressed words that were useful for the completion of the activities. Nevertheless, a couple of students had some difficulties with the vocabulary of the text, and did not understand it properly at first. However, all students succeeded in the performance of the activities. In particular, they matched first names and surnames on their own and most of them did it completely correctly; only one student made some corrections during the second listening, but the final version of the exercise was good. Moreover, students completed the family tree correctly and the comparison was very quick, maybe because they found the exercises easy to carry out and they did not feel the need to check their answers.

Concerning communication, students completed the second family tree correctly; they had some problems only with the spelling of some first names, but this was not relevant. However, the language they used to exchange information was not accurate at all, even if they had been provided with an example to follow: their grammar was very poor, they did not use the possessive (“Who is granddad of Kate?”), omitted the verb *to be* and communicated mainly through the use of lexical chunks (“Dad Kate?”). As regards the creation of questions about their own families, students had great difficulties and were not able to invent questions. Moreover, when they had prepared questions to follow, the production of correct answers was quite rare. For example, they omitted verbs, misused the verb *to be*, used the same word order as the questions, or communicated through key words. Finally, when they had to report

their peer's answers to the rest of the group, the main problem was to transform subjects and possessive adjectives from the first into the third person singular.

The form-focused activities were preceded by a brief review of the structure of the possessive through the provision of examples on the blackboard and the comparison with Italian language, and by an explicit explanation of the exercise, which showed students how to interpret the couples of names in the list. The main difficulty of the first activity was the vocabulary, as all students made six or seven mistakes out of nine sentences. Maybe the fact that one week had passed between the pre-task activity and this exercise may have influenced its outcome, but the number of errors is striking, however. Moreover, it is important to highlight that two different kinds of mistakes emerge. In fact, some students showed they did not remember vocabulary, as they used words that had no relationship with the right answers, or they did not answer at all. However, some errors are due to the fact that the students misinterpreted the instructions about the activity and, even if they had an example to follow, they exchanged the order of the names in the pair. For instance, if the names were Jennifer-Juliet, they did not ask who Jennifer is from Juliet's point of view, but they did the opposite reasoning. Thus their answer was, for example, "Jennifer is Juliet's daughter", while the correct one was "Jennifer is Juliet's mother". This type of error may indicate that students did not pay attention to the explanation of the exercise and to instructions, but it might also be a signal that they have not understood how the possessive works. Nonetheless, three out of four students used the possessive as the example showed, but this might mean that they are able to use the structure mechanically, but have not understood its meaning. Moreover, it must be said that one student did not complete the exercise, but this is certainly due to his

lack of motivation and his tendency to give difficult work up before trying to exploit his knowledge.

Furthermore, in the creation of questions with the provided chunks, most students matched the cards correctly, while one of them was not able to find the right word order of a *wh*- question. More errors emerged in the students' answers, as half of the students had problems with short answers, and others produced incorrect subject-verb agreement. Finally, two students made an error of comprehension.

The recap of the correct and incorrect answers given by the students of the first group within the form-focused activities is presented in the following chart.

<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>CORRECT ANSWERS</b>	<b>INCORRECT ANSWERS</b>	<b>OMITTED ANSWERS</b>
Description of the relationship between two relatives through the use of the possessive.	27	9	9
Use of the vocabulary about family	10	20	15
Formulation of questions with the verbs to be and to have got	4	6	/
Formulation of short and complete answers	2	8	/

On the other hand, during the pre-task the students of the second group showed less knowledge of the vocabulary regarding family than those of the first group, as they remembered less words, even if they were provided with suggestions. This happened

maybe because more time had passed since they studied the topic in class than the first group. In addition, they completed the lists on their own, but needed some help, as they asked for the Italian translation of a couple of terms. However, the comparison in pairs was very productive, as it stimulated students' reasoning. In fact, they asked themselves why they had put a particular word in a list rather than the other, discussed about their choices and collaborated to find a common solution. In order to demonstrate this positive behaviour, I will report here a brief confrontation between two students about the right collocation of the word "grandparents" and the interpretation of the two categories of the lists. The dialogue is translated into English.

**A:** I put "grandparents" in the extended family list

**B:** But sometimes they live with us. For example, if they get ill, they come and stay with us.

**A:** Or they go to the hospital.

**B:** But if you love them, you'll let them live with you. So they are part of the close family.

Consequently, the part of the guided comparison was carried out quickly as students had done a good work in pairs.

As regards the activities of the task based on listening comprehension, the text was read in the same way as to the first group. However, all students had to make some corrections to their choices in matching first names and surnames during the second listening. However, only one of them made one error in the final version of the exercise, because of some difficulties in comprehension. In addition, as in the first group, the family tree was completed easily and the comparison was rapid.

Considering oral production, the situation was very similar to that of the first group: all students succeeded in filling in the gaps to complete the family tree, but they had problems with the formal aspect of communication. Again, they made word order errors, did not use the possessive, tried to express themselves through keywords and did not remember the required vocabulary very well, maybe because a week had passed since when they revised it in the pre-task. As regards the production of personal questions and answers, these students demonstrated a greater will to communicate, but they still had problems with the word order and the use of possessive (e.g. “What’s name dad?”) and they used a lot of lexical chunks (“Sister?”). When they were provided with written questions to read, most students produced more accurate answers, even if they continued making some errors, such as omission of verbs. Furthermore, in this group another problem emerged: students who had some difficulties in communication were not able to concentrate in the pair work, maybe because they thought that the exercise was too difficult for them, and thus they chatted together in Italian and distracted the others. Finally, in the report phase students again tended to omit verbs, but they did better than the other group in the transformation of subjects and possessive adjectives.

The part of the task cycle that focused on language form started in the same way as with the first group, but I added a review of word order in questions. However, the results were very similar to those of the students of the first group. In fact, students made a lot of mistakes regarding vocabulary, some of which are due to the misunderstanding of instructions, or to a lack of ability to use the possessive effectively, while the structure of the possessive was used correctly because it

imitated the example provided. It is interesting to report here that one student used his English book to look at vocabulary during the first part of the exercise without being noticed. However, he made a lot of errors in the use of terms regarding family. This might mean that he did not even pay attention to what he read in the book, but it is more likely to be a signal of the fact that he has not understood how the possessive works, or that he is not able to use the structure of the family tree to find the relationships between the characters. Moreover, one student omitted the verb *to be* in all sentences, even if this may be due to his will to complete the exercise hastily. Finally, these students showed great difficulties in the formulation of complete and short answers, while they did better in the creation of questions with cards. In fact, only one students failed in the production of both questions and answers, due to word order and grammar errors.

An overview of the results produced by the students of the second group within the form-focused activities is presented in the following chart.

<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>CORRECT ANSWERS</b>	<b>INCORRECT ANSWERS</b>	<b>OMITTED ANSWERS</b>
Description of the relationship between two relatives through the use of the possessive.	32	1	3
Use of the vocabulary about family	14	19	3
Formulation of questions with the verbs to be and to have got	3	5	/
Formulation of short and complete answers	1	7	/



### *3.3.3 Discussion*

As this study concerns the role of grammar in EFL teaching, this discussion will not deal with the effectiveness of task-based learning in general, but with the effects that this approach has had on the investigated students' grammar proficiency. The quasi-experimental study, in fact, has demonstrated that students failed in general to acquire the language structures used during the performance of the task. Thus, even if they succeeded in completing the communicative activities, exchanging information and carrying out the task successfully, most students were not able to concentrate on grammar structures while they were doing these activities. In fact, they used the possessive, vocabulary about family and questions during the task, and received feedback on these structures from both the teacher and their peers. However, this has been not enough for them to complete the form-focused exercises correctly, as they made a lot of errors and demonstrated that they had not acquired the language structures involved. These results may obviously have been influenced by the students' low level and by their difficulties in learning.

Consequently, this study would appear to indicate it may be difficult to improve low proficient students' language knowledge with task-based activities. In fact, the approach was stimulating and interesting for the participants in the task cycle, but it did not lead automatically to the tangible enhancement of their knowledge of English grammar. Obviously, it is not possible to give a clear-cut judgment of a specific method after a single experiment of two lessons. In fact, students who participate in after school lessons usually need more time than the others to perform activities successfully, and thus the time devoted to this task cycle may have been not enough

for them to achieve adequate knowledge of the structure. Moreover, it is possible that more exposure to the foreign language before the performance of the task would have helped them to be more successful, as these students are not used to listen to English language during standard lessons. Thus, the sudden switch into English they had to make during the task-based activities might have prevented them from concentrating on the accuracy of what they said, as they are not used to the linguistic code they were using during the exercises. However, it must be said that most students' motivation was surprising, as they were really engaged in communication. In addition, it must be recognized that they succeeded in communicating something to their peers and, even if their production was not accurate, the fact that they were able to make the others understand them is an important achievement for students with such difficulties.

On the other hand, the outcome of my study may indicate that students who lack language proficiency need a more traditional and grammar-focused type of instruction, at least in the context of after school classes, which aims at making them fill their gaps in language knowledge. In fact, a more gradual approach which includes explicit instruction on grammar features and on their application is likely to suit these students better, as it allows them to internalize structures more effectively and to learn how to use them before exploiting them in oral or written production. However, it is important to remember that the context of this study is very different from that of a typical secondary school class, which usually consists of a more heterogeneous group of students, and thus should allow teachers to exploit different teaching methods successfully.



## CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to investigate the role of grammar in the teaching of English as a foreign language within the context of Italian secondary schools. This has been achieved through a research project, which involved a questionnaire for secondary school teachers and two experimental task-based lessons, which have been carried out with weak secondary school students, who are provided with extra English lessons during the school year.

The theoretical background of this study has shown that the role of grammar instruction is a controversial issue, and this is proved by the fact that the debate about it has started in the 1950s and is still lively. This is certainly a consequence of the complexity of the field, as foreign language teaching often involves different disciplines, such as psychology and pedagogy, and also teachers' personal experiences. On the other hand, learning a foreign language is also a demanding activity, as it involves specific processes, such as noticing and restructuring, and it is affected by language, environmental and individual variables. For these reasons, the best method to teach a foreign language has seen to be impossible to find, and thus the role of grammar has shifted from absolute necessity to uselessness many times during the last six decades, while several different methods and approaches have been proposed, supported and then criticized.

The results of the study reflect the complicated context in which it is situated. In fact, the teachers who were questioned in the first part of the study show a heterogeneous attitude toward grammar, and a difference is to be noticed between those of the

Italian and the English International school. In particular, teachers at the Italian school demonstrate two different tendencies as regards formal instruction, as half of them rely on it in their teaching activity, while the others prefer to limit the time devoted to grammar instruction in their lessons, in favour of a communicative approach. However, at the same time these teachers state that they meet some difficulties in carrying out communicative activities and alternative lessons; the reason might be an unfavourable classroom context, but also teachers' lack of explicit awareness about the methodologies they use. On the other hand, teachers at the English school affirm that they rely on grammar instruction and consider it as fundamental, even if they usually use a communicative approach without finding particular difficulties. In order to present a picture of the situation, it can be said that in the opinion of the teachers investigated grammar has still an important role in EFL instruction, even if its embedding in communicative activities is seen as necessary.

As regards the quasi-experimental study about task-based learning, some difficulties have come to the surface. In fact, students succeeded in communicating with their peers, producing an output that was comprehensible, even if not accurate. In addition, most of them demonstrated that they were able to use the vocabulary required in the communication task. However, students had lower results in the form-focused activities and they showed some difficulties in the use of the grammar structures exploited during the task autonomously. Certainly, the students' low proficiency at the beginning of the task and the little time they had to concentrate on language form played an important role in their quite weak performance, and the results do not mean that task-based learning does not work. On the other hand, they

could be considered a sign of the difficulties in improving weak students' language proficiency through alternative methods.

The general conclusions to be drawn from the present study are that grammar has regained its important role in EFL instruction, as has been recognized by most investigated teachers, but this does not mean that English lessons should be based exclusively on formal instruction. In fact, grammar is seen as an integral part of wider activities, which include communication and focus on meaning. However, a communicative approach may not always be easily applicable, as has been demonstrated by Italian school teachers' difficulties in carrying out pair work and activities based on interaction, but also by the results of the two task-based lessons in the quasi-experimental study.

It is important to state that the study presented in this dissertation is a modest contribution to the research in the field of foreign language teaching, as it has some limits, such as the small sample on which it is based and the specific context in which it has been carried out. As a consequence, its results and conclusions have to be considered as limited to the specific context of the research.

Obviously, many other issues can be investigated in further research, regarding not only the role of grammar, but also the effectiveness of communicative approaches, the influence of learner variables, the role of input and output in language learning, and many other topics. In fact, the field of foreign language teaching is an extensive one and it is worth investigating. What appears to be central is the need for a continuation of the studies on the various aspects of FL teaching, in order to provide teachers with a theoretical and practical background, so that they can base their work on solid foundations. On the other hand, foreign language teachers have to be aware

of the complexity of their work and, as a consequence, they should devote time and energy to their professional training, in order to know which methods and approaches can best suit the context in which they teach. This condition should allow teachers to work in a stimulating environment and learners to acquire the foreign language successfully, as they are provided with the instruments and methodologies they need.

## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire for teachers

#### **The role of grammar in teaching English as a foreign language**

Dear teacher,

The following questionnaire is part of a study on the role of grammar instruction in EFL teaching I'm conducting for my final dissertation at university. I'm a student from Cittadella and I'm graduating next year in *Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane* at the University of Padua. The aim of my study is to investigate whether grammar instruction has an important role in English teaching and how its role can be exploited effectively.

The following questions are about your experiences as an English teacher at secondary school and your answers will be of great value for my study. Obviously, there are no right or wrong answers, so any comments will be appreciated. For this reason, I ask you to provide honest answers, as the content of this study will remain strictly confidential.

In the questionnaire you'll find multiple choice questions, please choose only one option for each item. In addition, most questions are followed by a 5-level scale: please, choose the option that most suits your opinion (SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N= neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree). Your contributions to the short open-ended questions will also be extremely appreciated. Please think about your students and the real conditions and environment in which you work every day in answering the questions. The entire questionnaire will take you about 30 minutes.

Thank you for your attention and your precious time.

Enjoy!



## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

### Personal experience

1. Where did your initial teacher training take place?

- Italy
- abroad (please specify)

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2. Have you ever attended any training courses abroad?

- yes
- no

If so, where and when did they take place?

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3. Have you attended any refresher courses about English teaching or language teaching in general in the last five years?

- yes
- no

If so, where did they take place? What topics did they deal with? Did you find them useful?

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4. How many years have you been teaching English?

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5. As a school teacher have you always worked with students aged 11 – 14?

yes

no

If not, have you noticed any differences between students aged 11-14 and those of other ages?

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### Importance of grammar instruction

6. Students at a beginner/intermediate level need to learn grammar to acquire a foreign language

7. The best way to introduce students to a foreign language is to provide them with grammar instruction first of all

8. English can be taught effectively through a communicative approach that focuses on the conveyance of the meaning and not on the form

9. Students acquire a foreign language using it, not learning it through rules and examples created ad hoc

10. Grammar teaching helps students to learn how to use the foreign language to communicate accurately

11. Real-life communication can take place effectively even without broad grammatical knowledge

SA	A	N	D	SD

12. My students can acquire the skills of writing and speaking more effectively if they have a good grounding in grammar

13. My students can acquire the skills of reading and listening more effectively if they have a good grounding in grammar

SA	A	N	D	SD

### Methods

14. How much time in an average lesson do you devote to explicit grammar instruction?

- more than 80%
- 50 – 80%
- 20 – 50%
- less than 20%

15. My students can internalize grammar structures more effectively if rules are presented explicitly

16. Focus on specific grammatical forms during lessons raises the level of accuracy in the spoken/written use of English

17. The explanation of a specific grammar structure is always followed by exercises in my English lessons

18. English is acquired proficiently if students are encouraged to communicate freely

19. The communicative use of English and continuous exposure to the language make grammar instruction unnecessary for learning the language proficiently

SA	A	N	D	SD

**Communicative activities**

20. My students are willing to communicate in English in the classroom

21. I've found some effective methods to encourage my students to communicate in English

SA	A	N	D	SD

Can you briefly explain them?

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22. How much time in an average English lesson do you devote to spoken interaction between students?

- more than 80%
- 50 – 80%
- 20 – 50%
- less than 20%

23. Effective communicative activities are difficult to carry out

SA	A	N	D	SD

If you agree, why do you think it is so difficult?

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24. Pair work is too time consuming, so it isn't possible to do it often

25. Pair work is useful to learn how to use English effectively

26. My students are able to cooperate in pair work activities

SA	A	N	D	SD

27. How often do you organize pair work activities in your classes in an average school year?

- more than twice a month
- once/twice a month
- twice/three times a year
- never

28. It is useful to introduce grammatical topics through communicative activities

29. The use of language to complete a specific task can help my students to acquire linguistic features

30. If I organize a lesson starting with a communicative task, my students won't then be able to focus effectively on the grammatical structures they've used without receiving explicit instruction on them

SA	A	N	D	SD

31. Grammar instruction is independent from activities that involve communication or spoken/written comprehension

32. Explicit grammar instruction should be embedded in a concrete and wider task

33. Every time we find a new language structure I spend some time introducing it to my students, explaining the rules explicitly and providing examples of its use

34. It is good for students to find examples of new grammar structures before they have had explicit instruction on them

35. I provide my students with grammar instruction only if I think they're ready to acquire the language feature in question and I avoid explaining structures that are too complex for their level

SA	A	N	D	SD

### Errors

36. Correcting students' mistakes during oral production is useful to make them learn English effectively, even if I have to interrupt them in order to give feedback

37. Explicit feedback on students' errors can affect their will to communicate

38. Correcting students without stressing their errors but proposing a correct version of the utterance (implicit feedback) is an effective way to improve their proficiency

39. Students may not understand or notice their errors when implicit feedback is provided

SA	A	N	D	SD

**Syllabus and organization**

40.Syllabus constraints prevent me from organizing alternative lessons based e.g. on communicative tasks

41.I can cope easily with time organization and I'm able to include different types of lessons in my syllabus

42.The environment of an average classroom makes it difficult for me to carry out communicative tasks

SA	A	N	D	SD

**Assessment**

43.Do you think that the language proficiency of your students can be assessed with a test involving written comprehension and production and not focusing on grammatical structures?

- yes
- no

Can you briefly explain why?

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44.How much of an average English test of yours concerns grammar exercises?

- 100%
- 80%
- 50%
- 30%
- 10% or less

45. Assessing grammar is fundamental to evaluate students' level of acquisition of the language

SA	A	N	D	SD

The questionnaire is complete.

If you are available for a further brief interview on the topics of the questions above, please leave your name and contacts here:

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

I'd like to remind you that even if you give your personal data, the content of the questionnaire will be used only for this study and will thus remain strictly confidential.

For any information you need, please contact me:

GIULIA PONTAROLO    MOBILE PHONE: 3475031395    E-MAIL:  
[giuly\\_ponta88@hotmail.it](mailto:giuly_ponta88@hotmail.it)

Thank you for your important contribution.



## Materials for task-based lessons

### DESCRIPTION

Lucy Smith and Kate Brown are best friends. They are 12 and they go to the same school in London.

Lucy has got a big family. Her parents' names are John and Linda Smith and they are English. Lucy's father is 48 and her mother is 46. Lucy has got two brothers: Mark is 21 and David is 15. Mark is married: his wife's name's Betty and she's 20. They've got a son, Ben. He's one year old and he's Lucy's nephew. Lucy has got 8 cousins. Her favourite cousin is Mary. She's 15 years old and she's very nice. Mary's parents' names are William and Juliet. Luke and Jennifer Jones are Lucy's grandparents. They are quite old. He's 90 years old and she is 88. Lucy is their granddaughter.

Kate's family is quite small. Her mother's name is Emily. She's 35 and she's English, but Kate's father's Australian. His name's Ryan Brown and he's 38. Kate has got one little sister, Michelle. She's 6 years old. Kate has got two cousins in London: Christopher and Helen. Her uncle's name is Patrick and her aunt's name is Susan. Helen is 25 and she is married: her husband's name is Bob. Their daughter's name is Elizabeth and she's three. Kate has got three other cousins but they live in Australia. Kate's grandparents live in London but they are Australian. Her grandfather's name is Kevin and her grandmother's name is Claire. They are 75 years old.

## LISTENING COMPREHENSION

### ES. 1

Mentre ascolti la descrizione delle famiglie di Lucy e Kate collega con una freccia i nomi delle persone con la famiglia a cui appartengono.

Poi ascolta di nuovo la descrizione e confronta le tue risposte con quelle di un compagno.

John

Mark

Lucy

SMITH

Ben

Jennifer

Patrick

BROWN

Emily

Christopher

Kate

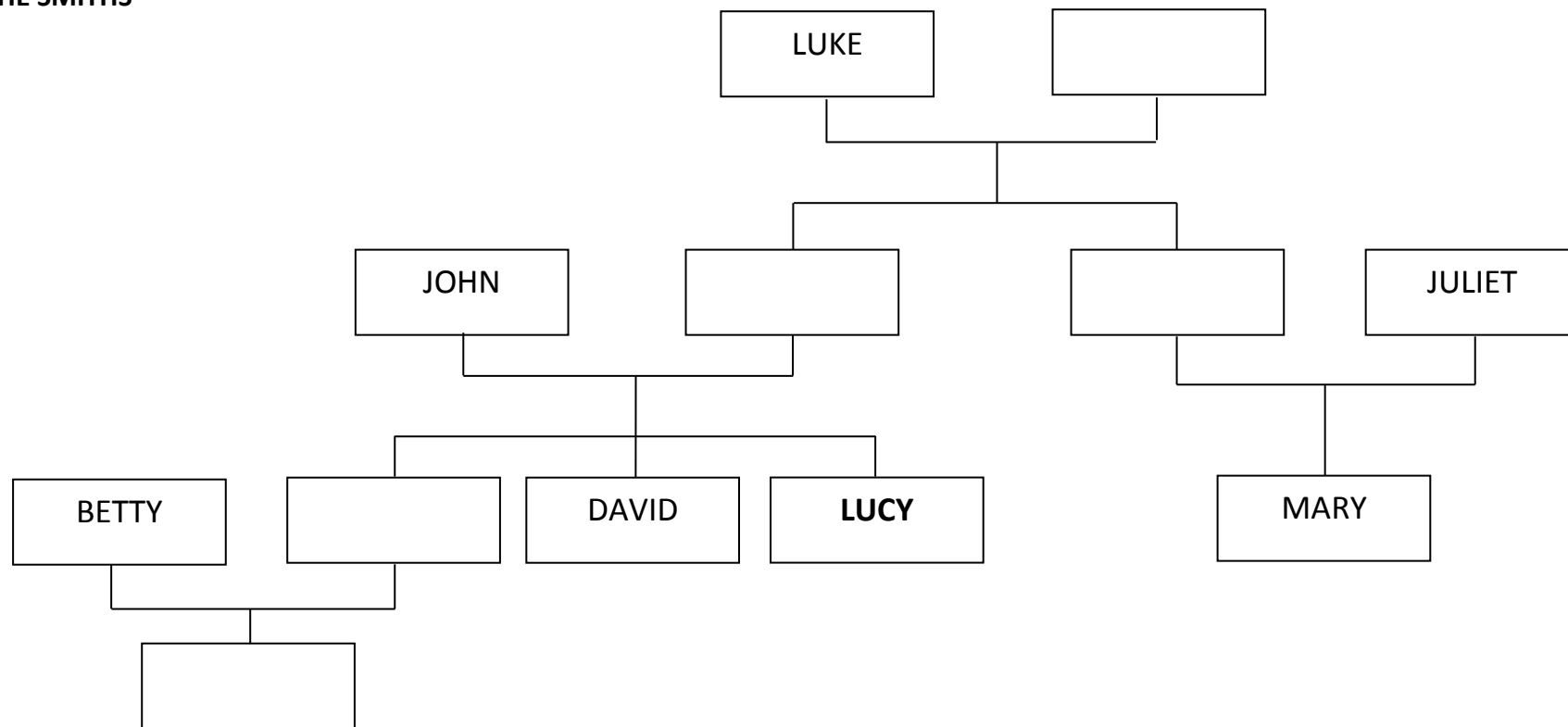
Michelle

Kevin

**ES. 2**

Ascolta nuovamente la descrizione delle famiglie e completa l'albero genealogico della famiglia SMITH riempiendo gli spazi vuoti. Poi confronta le tue risposte con quelle di un tuo compagno.

**THE SMITHS**

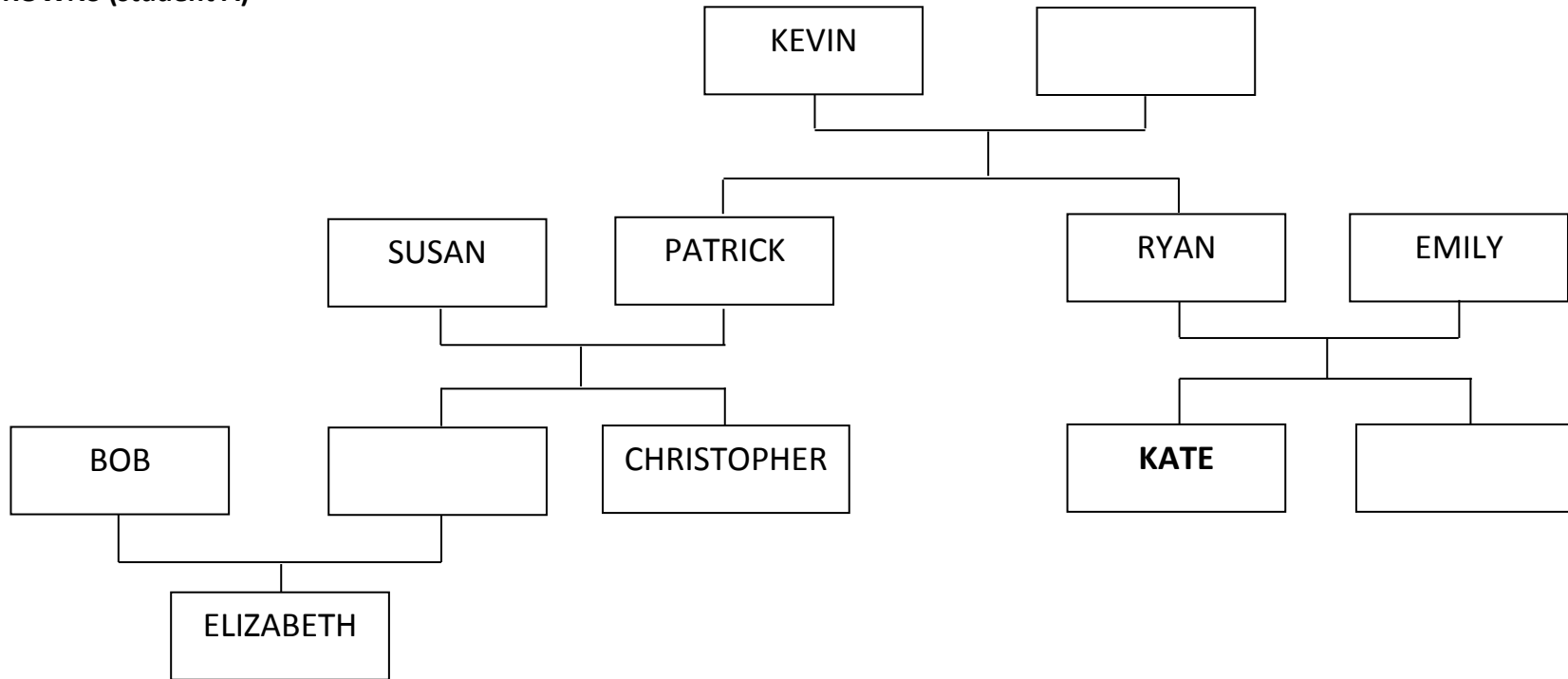


**ES. 3**

In coppia: completa l'albero genealogico della famiglia BROWN inserendo nello schema le informazioni mancanti. Per aiutarti, chiedi al tuo compagno le informazioni che ti mancano, formulando domande sui membri della famiglia. Usa il lessico della famiglia che hai ascoltato nella descrizione e i nomi già presenti nello schema.

Esempio: Who's Kate's grandfather? He's Kevin.

**THE BROWNS (student A)**

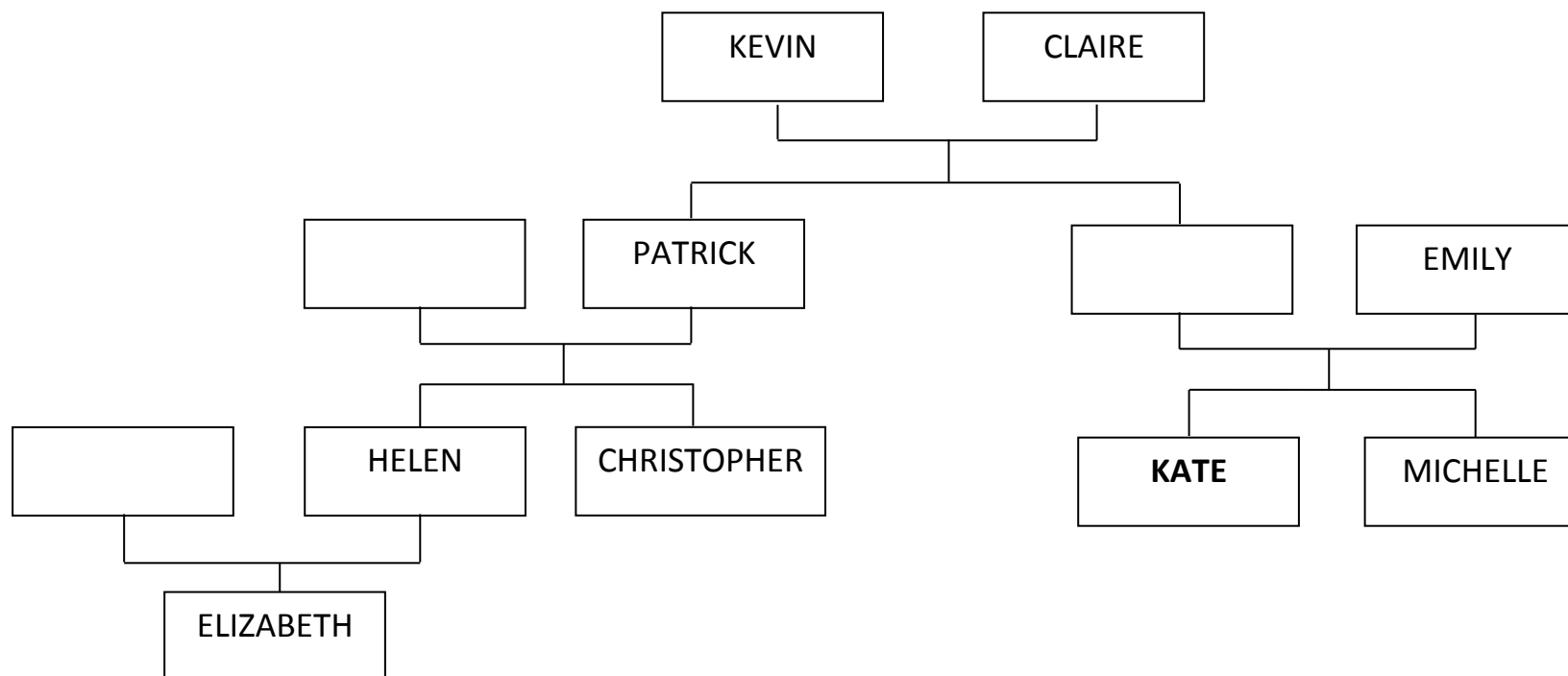


**ES. 3**

In coppia: completa l'albero genealogico della famiglia BROWN inserendo nello schema le informazioni mancanti. Per aiutarti, chiedi al tuo compagno le informazioni che ti mancano, formulando domande sui membri della famiglia. Usa il lessico della famiglia che hai ascoltato nella descrizione e i nomi già presenti nello schema.

Esempio: Who's Kate's grandfather? He's Kevin.

**THE BROWNS (student B)**



## **SPEAKING**

In coppia: a turno, rispondete oralmente alle seguenti domande riguardanti la vostra famiglia

1. What's are your parents' name?
2. How old is your dad? How old is your mum?
3. Have you got any brothers or sisters?
4. What are their names?
5. How old are they?
6. How many cousins have you got?
7. What's your grandfather's name? How old is he?
8. What's your grandmother name? How old is she?
9. Is your family big or small?
10. Have you got any pets?
11. Who is your favourite uncle or aunt?

## **FOCUS ON LANGUAGE FORM**

### **ES. 1**

Con le seguenti coppie di nomi forma delle frasi che descrivano la parentela tra le due persone indicate. Aiutati con gli alberi genealogici delle famiglie BROWN e SMITH. Usa il lessico della famiglia e il genitivo sassone.

Esempio: Helen - Kate -> Helen is Kate's grandmother

1. Luke – David
2. Jennifer – Juliet
3. Mary – David
4. Ben – Linda
5. Betty – Mark
6. Helen – Patrick
7. Christopher – Helen
8. Bob – Helen
9. Patrick – Michelle

**ES. 2**

Usa i cartoncini per formare due domande che riguardano le famiglie di Lucy e Kate. Quando li avrai messi in ordine, trascrivi qui sotto la domanda e rispondi.

1.

.....  
.....

2.

.....  
.....

**QUESTIONS:**

- How old/ is/ Lucy's/ mother?
- Who/ are/ Kate's/ cousins?
- What/ is/ Lucy's/ surname?
- How many/ brothers/ has/ Lucy/ got?
- Has/ Kate/ got/ a/ sister?
- Have/ Betty and Mark/ got/ a/ son?
- How old/ is/ Lucy's /grandfather?
- How many/ cousins/ has/ Lucy/ got?
- What/ is/ Kate's/ surname?
- Who/ is/ Kate's /aunt?
- How old/ is/ Kate's/ sister?
- Are/ Kevin and Claire/ English?
- Are/ John and Linda/ English?
- What/ is/ Luke's /surname?

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