Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning

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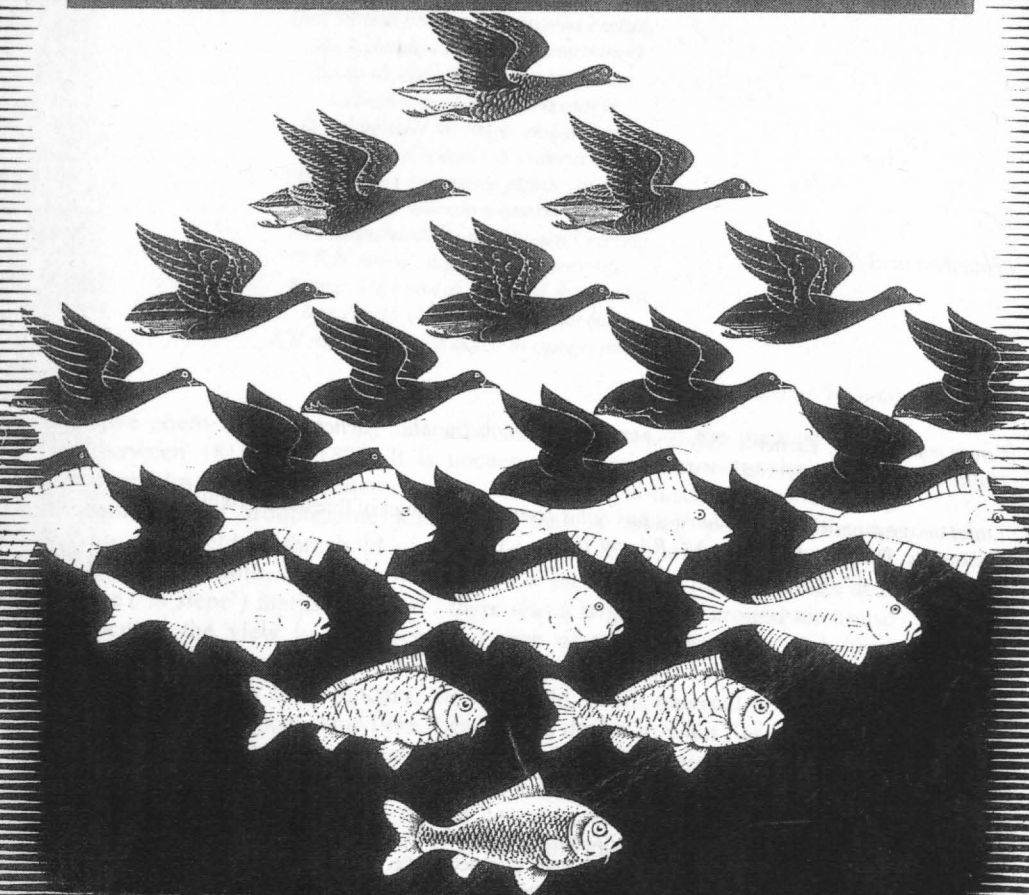
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17. TROUBLESOME GRAMMAR KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION-RESEARCH-LED ASSESSMENT DESIGN:

Learning from Liminality

FOREWORD

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,
E questa siepe, che da tanta parte
Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
Silenzi, e profondissima quiete
Io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco
Il cor non si spaura. E come il vento
Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
Infinito silenzio a questa voce
Vo comparando: e mi sovvien l'eterno,
E le morte stagioni, e la presente
E viva, e il suon di lei. Cosi tra questa
Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare[1].

(Giacomo Leopardi, L'infinito)

The above poem was written by Giacomo Leopardi, one of the greatest Italian poets, between 1818 and 1821. It is uncanny how this poem can be seen as a metaphor illustrating the epistemological and ontological discussion surrounding the acquisition of troublesome knowledge that is taking place within the relatively new field of threshold concepts (e.g. Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008: Land, Meyer & Smith, 2008). In the poem, Leopardi writes how he holds dear the hedge ('la siepe') that is both real - there was a large hedge around his house that obscured the view to the open landscape of the Appennine's 'Sibillini' mountain range beyond it, and of the plain lying at its feet - and metaphorical - the hedge was literally the boundary, the threshold, of his paternal home's land, of his 'safety area'. At the same time, Leopardi is drawn to what lies beyond the hedge, the seemingly 'never-ending spaces beyond it': '*interminati spazi di là da quella*', even if this 'unboundedness' fills him with fear: '*ove per poco il cor non si spaura*' ('wherefore my heart almost loses itself in fear'). The dialectic between the threshold (the hedge – '*la siepe*') and the 'never-ending' horizon

beyond it, reflects the oscillation between the relative safety of the 'known' and the risky territory that is the unknown. Leopardi, a great erudite, who was translating Greek tragedies into Italian by the age of 12, finds it delightful, albeit scary, to imagine 'drowning' in the infinite space beyond the threshold and embrace the unknown. This contrasts with the approach to troublesome knowledge of many present-day undergraduate first year students in the UK, who tend to hover around what they perceive to be the 'safe' side of the hedge and come from a secondary school system that often encourages them to strictly adhere to set rules in order to pass examinations set with rigid criteria that do not allow for creative risk-taking and independent thinking.

Crossing thresholds is part of the ontological journey necessary to become independent thinkers at university level. It is a risky journey (Barnett 2007), but an exciting one too that could open new, challenging, but possibly pleasant horizons: *'e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare'* ('and to shipwreck is sweet for me in this sea').

It is the indefinite nature of what lies behind the threshold that scares students, particularly in their first year of undergraduate studies. The curricular actions carried out in a variety of disciplines following the identification of threshold concepts (e.g. Gray & Yavash, 2007; Davies & Mangan, 2007; Osmond & Turner, 2008) to help students cope with and understand troublesome knowledge, aim at turning the fear of the indefinite into a love for the endless epistemological horizons that can be viewed once a conceptual threshold is crossed. Meyer, Land and Smith illustrate the transformation brought about by the crossing of the threshold concept with the original choice of the journey of a raw Desirée potato becoming a roast one (2008, p. ix), understanding threshold concepts is not confined to the conceptual transformation bounded by subject matter, it also about a 'change in sense of self, a change in subjectivity on the part of the learner'.

The liminal state is pivotal to the change process. The anthropologist Victor Turner's definition of the liminal state as the ambiguous 'betwixt and between' space (1967) is quite fitting. As argued in Meyer, Land and Smith (2008, pp. x–xi), the liminal state is a pre-cursor of the ontological shift. Students who become 'stuck' on the 'pre-liminal' position (which has been previously compared to Dante's Hell in the *Divine Comedy*, Orsini-Jones, 2008, p. 213) lack the flexibility necessary to oscillate in the liminal state. Not all students in the latter state will cross the threshold, and might regress to the 'stuck' position, but those who can live with the uncertainty of troublesome knowledge are those who will not feel too threatened by the uncertain change-process area of the *limen*.

There is some evidence that tailor-made assessment tasks based upon threshold concepts that have been identified in some disciplines have helped students with understanding troublesome knowledge (Davies & Mangan, 2007; Orsini-Jones & Sinclair, 2008; Gray & Yavash, 2007). It is proposed here that encouraging students to actively engage with metacognition relating to the threshold concept identified while they are in the liminal state can also contribute to their 'readiness' to cross it.

INTRODUCTION

This study summarises the findings of two academic years of action-research cycles of curricular intervention (2006–2007 and 2007–2008) aimed at helping undergraduate languages students with troublesome grammar knowledge. It is based upon the outcomes of a research project carried out by staff in Languages at Coventry University and evaluated in collaboration with an educational researcher from the University of Strathclyde, entitled *Grammar: Researching Activities for Student Progress* (GRASP)[2].

The work develops from earlier research projects (Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007; Orsini-Jones, 2008; Orsini-Jones & Sinclair, 2008) highlighting a 'threshold concept' encountered by languages students: the overarching structure of a sentence also known in linguistics as the '*rank scale concept*' (e.g. Coulthard, 1985, p. 121; Halliday, 1985; Crystal, 2006, p. 251, see Table 1). This overall concept is formed by the grammar categories illustrated in the table below, which means that students needs to master each of the fundamental grammar 'milestones' listed in the table before being able to grasp the overall concept.

The study has taken an action-research approach to curriculum change (as illustrated in McNiff, 1988 and in McKernan, 1992). Successive cohorts of students in their first year of studies at Coventry University have provided active input and feedback on the actions taken. In the academic years 2006–2007 and 2007–2008, the intervention took place within the module entitled *Methods and Approaches* that supports learning on both generic and subject specific skills for students majoring in languages.

The data collected for this study highlighted that many students reading languages experienced 'grammar anxiety'. It was worrying that many of them were also planning to become English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or Modern Languages (ML) teachers and would therefore have to explain grammar to their students. Moreover, as stressed in previous literature (Orsini-Jones, 2008, p. 215), there is a requirement from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England and Wales (QAA, 2002, p. 9) that students reading languages and

Table 1. The hierarchical structure of a sentence - rank scale concept - (Crystal, 2006, p. 251) - 'Glossary' provided in Appendix 2

sentences	morphemes
which are analysed into	which are used to build
clauses	words
which are analysed into	which are used to build
phrases	phrases
which are analysed into	which are used to build
words	clauses
which are analysed into	which are used to build
morphemes	sentences

linguistics should develop the ability to carry out formal grammar analysis of thelanguages studied. It was therefore crucial to try and put measures in place that could help students with overcoming troublesome grammar knowledge and design both targeted curricular activities and a grammar analysis assessed task that, in Perkins' words (2006, pp. 42–43) would equip students with the 'conceptual arsenal' of linguistic analysis and would make them fluent in the 'foreign' epistemic game of linguistics.

The grammar sessions designed for module *Academic Methods and Approaches* aimed therefore to raise students' awareness of the threshold concept identified and of its individual troublesome components (individual grammar categories in Table 1). Feedback and data from the previous action-research cycles indicated that a socio-collaborative assessed task in particular had helped students with understanding the concept: the *Group Grammar Project*, a web-based grammar microteaching unit used by students to demonstrate their understanding of grammar categories to each other. The assessed task was re-designed and re-focused to help students further with crossing the threshold concept identified.

MODULE ACADEMIC METHODS AND APPROACHES

Module *Academic Methods and Approaches* is a 20 credit mandatory module, one out of six for the first year of study on a BA Honours in French or Spanish for both Single Honours and Joint Programmes. It started in academic year 2006–07 and was based upon module *Academic and Professional Skills for Language Learning –* that had ran between 2001–2005 (details in Orsini-Jones, 2004 and in Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007).

The aims of *Academic Methods and Approaches* are to prepare students for academic study at degree level, to illustrate the nature and processes of research in humanities and to encourage students to engage with the tasks set in an academic and professional way using appropriate e-learning tools. The assessment tasks for the module are designed to provide practical experience of applying academic and professional skills in actual case studies relevant to their study programme, engage in personal development planning and in team work. Students are given the opportunity to reflect upon and record their personal development both via the e-portfolio *PebblePAD and* in discussion forums within the Virtual Learning Environment used (*Blackboard Vista*).

The intended learning outcomes are that, on completion of this module, languages students should be able to:

1. Search for, review and correctly reference literature relating to their languages degree using the Harvard style.
2. Interpret data from a variety of sources, evaluate it and indicate how it can be used for specific academic tasks relating to their course.
3. Illustrate their knowledge and understanding of texts, concepts and theories relating to their course.

4. Demonstrate the ability to work as part of a team, design a website on grammar categories - English and other language(s) studied - and present it to their peers.
5. Reflect on the experience of the group grammar project in an individual reflective report.

(Module Information Directory Coventry University 2007)

The module outcomes are assessed as follows:

– Coursework 1 – 20%, *Information retrieval and academic writing online in-class test* assesses outcomes 1, 2 and 3.

– Coursework 2 – 50% - *Group grammar project and presentation* assesses outcomes 1, 2, 3 and 4.

– Coursework 3 – 30% *Individual reflective report on the group grammar project* assesses outcomes 1, 3, 4 and 5.

This study focuses in particular on coursework tasks two and three which were designed to engage students with the threshold concept identified, stimulate a debate on troublesome grammar knowledge and encouraged them to reflect upon their grammar learning journey. This work also builds on one of the findings from the previous cycles of the action research process, i.e. that metacognition appears to help undergraduate first year students with 'coping' with troublesome knowledge (Orsini-Jones & Sinclair 2008).

GRAMMAR LEARNING AND METACOGNITION

Students engaging with language learning at Higher Education level are usually expected to reach a level of proficiency in both written and oral skills comparable to that of educated native speakers.

Relationships between reflection and learning are complex and multifaceted (Moon, 2004, p. 85). There is however evidence that reflection on what is being learnt and on the processes involved in learning can enhance learning and foster understanding (e.g.: Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000).

The role of metacognition features as a (contested) topic in the field of formal grammar learning. It is generally acknowledged that there is a difference between 'tacit' grammar knowledge and 'active' application of that knowledge (this relates to Chomsky, 1968, further details in Mitchell & Myles, 2004). There is an ongoing debate relating to whether or not engaging in metacognitive grammatical activities can enhance language learning and whether or not a focus on linguistic form can benefit language skills in the target language studied (Klapper, 2006, pp. 396–405).

The benefits of stimulating the language learner's proficiency via metacognition at university level have been highlighted by many linguists (e.g. Hurd, 2000; Hauck, 2005; Orsini-Jones, 2004; Klapper, 2006). For the above reasons, for the duration of the *Group Grammar Project*, students were encouraged to engage in reflective practice upon the activities carried out. Specific assessment tasks, both formative and summative, were designed for this purpose.

DESIGNING A 'METAREFLECTIVE' SOCIO-COLLABORATIVE ASSESSED TASK TO OVERCOME TROUBLESOME KNOWLEDGE: THE GROUP GRAMMAR PROJECT

The Group Grammar Project is a rather complex task (Table 2), attempting to develop subject-specific skills while consolidating the generic ones covered in the first term in module *Academic Methods and Approaches* and encouraging students to become reflective learners. The task involved an analysis of the structure of sentences, clauses, phrases and words in terms of the item immediately below each one on the rank scale and a taxonomy of clauses, phrases, words and morphemes (Table 1). Diagnostic activities were carried out before the students started on the group task, such as formative multiple choice tests on grammar terminology that were administered to students to identify grammar issues before they started creating the web-pages for the *Group Grammar Project*.

Working in groups, students had to create a website containing linked web pages. In each page they had to analyse a sentence. At least one of the sentences had to be in one of the target languages studied, and the other(s) in English. In academic year 2006–2007 students chose their own sentences (which had to be approved by the module leader), while in 2007–2008 they had to choose from a list given to them (in view of the results obtained in 2006–2008, more on this point below), and each group had to create the relevant analysis and website. The latter had to be created with the *Webfolio* tool in *PebblePAD* and shared with the rest of the group and tutors via the module's *Gateway*. Each *Webfolio* had to be presented to the rest of the class by the group which had created it.

The choice to ask students to use the *Webfolio* tool of the e-portfolio *PebblePAD* to create the grammar web-pages was deliberate as the software is designed to encourage students to engage in reflective practice when writing an entry – or 'asset' - as it is called in *PebblePAD*. *PebblePAD* also makes it relatively easy to create active hypertextual nodes, so that students could add active links to grammar explanations of the grammar categories analysed in their *Group Grammar Project*. Moreover, *PebblePAD* maximises the socio-collaborative and constructivist aspects of the task, as assets can be created and shared both individually and via a shared *gateway* that operates like a 'content-rich' forum, where students can peer-review each other's work (Orsini-Jones *et al.*, 2007).

Table 2. The Group Grammar Project 2006–2008

1. Analyse sentences in English and French (and or Spanish) according to the Hallidayan *'rank scale'* (Halliday, 1985; Crystal, 2006 – see Table 1) in group;
2. Create a website in a collaborative way, sharing online files using the *Webfolio* tool in the e-portfolio *PebblePAD* to illustrate the group's grammar findings/ analysis;
3. Each group to reflect on the collaborative process and present the website with the analysis of the findings and reflections to tutor and peers;
4. Each student to write a reflective individual report on the group grammar presentation and webfolio creation.

After the presentation had taken place, students had to engage in anonymous self- and peer-assessment and then write an individual reflective report on the project.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The results reported in this study are part of a larger, iterative work for which the overarching methodology is action-research – Table 3 (Orsini-Jones and Jones 2007, pp. 96–97; Orsini-Jones & Sinclair, 2008, p. 77).

Both qualitative and quantitative data (mixed method approach) were used, with a stronger stress on qualitative data ('QUAL-quant' model, Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 170–175).

Informed consent to participate in the research was sought from each participant and the staff involved adhered to the guidelines issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Information sheets and consent forms (adapted from Mackey & Gass, 2005) were used with both Languages and English Degree Students.

The sample of interviewees for the semi-structured interviews was a self-selected group from the whole population on module *Academic Methods and Approaches*. Out of 29 students in 2006–07, 10 volunteered for the semi-structured interviews (7 female and 3 male) and 14 (10 female and 4 male) out of 40 in 2007–08. Although most students were 18–19 years of age, the age range was 18–45.

The data were subsequently anonymised, transcribed by the research assistant, transferred to the software package for qualitative data analysis *Atlas-Ti* (Muhr, 1997) and coded independently by the module leader (who was also the principal investigator for the research project) and the research assistant. The codes were then compared and subsequently discussed with the co-researcher from the University of Strathclyde. The research assistant took hand-written minutes of each grammar session and recorded the students' reactions to the activities.

Table 3. Stages in an action-research project

1. A problematic issue is identified (**reconnaissance** stage);
2. Change is **planned** collaboratively (staff and students) to address the issue;
3. The change process is **implemented** – '**acted out**';
4. All agents involved in the change process **reflect** upon its outcomes, both while it is happening and at the end of the first phase of implementation;
5. Actions are taken to **re-plan** the changes and the second phase of the action-research cycle starts (McNiff, 1988; McKernan, 1992; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990 and 2005; Kember, 2000).

All three researchers participated in the design of the following questions:

1. When did you feel most 'stuck' during the grammar project?
2. Were there any times when you suddenly realised something important? If so, what had helped you?

3. Do you feel any differently about grammar now than you did at the start of the grammar project?

4. Were you surprised at grammar issues you knew about and other people didn't?

5. How do you feel about the way grammar was taught to you at school?

6. What remains the main issue for you now about grammar?

7. What do you wish you had known before you started the grammar project?

8. What 'grammar tips' would you give to a first year undergraduate student?

9. How would you describe your 'grammar journey' on this module?

The questions were administered to the students on 1 March 2007 (2006–2007 cohort) and on 17 April 2008 (2007–2008 cohort).

The quantitative data mainly consisted of an analysis of the results obtained by the students in their two attempts at the formative grammar tests on grammar categories/terminology and the marks they obtained for the *Group Grammar Project* (both presentation and individual report components).

The diagnostic online grammar tests designed by the research team were released to students in the second week of term two, at the beginning or the grammar part of the programme for the module. They were then hidden from 'View' in the VLE and released again at the end of the term to be re-taken after the completion of the *Group Grammar Project*. The VLE's assessment tool automatic processing of the diagnostic tests provided statistical data on the students' performance in each test.

The participating students' individual reports were also inputted into *Atlas-Ti*, coded with reference to problematic issues relating to grammar and 'triangulated' with the previously collected data and discussed with colleagues in Spanish, French and English in December 2007 and June 2008.

DATA RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In both years it was confirmed that the concepts listed below were the most troublesome components of the overall *rank scale* threshold concept identified:
 – Complex sentences (relationships and identification of verbs);
 – Clauses (identifying subject-verb-object);
 – Phrases (confusion with clauses);
 – Word classification (adverbs and prepositions).

Also, the following points were confirmed as those that impacted negatively upon the crossing of the identified threshold concept and/or one or more of its components:

1. 'New to me' terminology (students opposed to change, refusing new type of analysis, refusing its semantics);

2. Prior (mis)knowledge of terms such as 'phrase' or 'clause' – lecturers had to 'undo' pre-conceived definitions of the grammar categories involved;

3. 'Prior knowledge' – background and previous grammar learning experience;

4. Reliance in group work upon peers who found the grammatical categories 'troublesome' but decided nevertheless to take a lead in the analysis of the sentences;
5. Misunderstanding of the concepts and lack of ability to ask lecturers for help;
6. Lack of motivation towards the module and/or grammar ('grammar boring');
7. Lack of reinforcement/support by other tutors teaching languages;
8. Grammar fear (feeling inadequate/not up to the task set).

Lack of awareness of underlying grammar principles emerged as a main concern for the students interviewed, particularly the native English ones (Semi-Structured Group interviews March 2007):

Extract 1 (where 'I' is interviewer and 'P' participant)

P: ...I can't really recall a lot of grammar being done at secondary school or primary school at all really. As I said only really from doing languages have I picked up the grammar side of things but I can't recall any time of actually doing grammar at school.

I: yeah. Do you think it should be taught in the schools?

P: I think it should really. I think there's been a lot of times when I've been sitting in whether it's a French or a Spanish class and you can see everyone sitting there racking their brains to try and understand what the teacher's saying and it's not necessarily the fact that the teacher's confusing matters, it's just the fact that we don't know the English to then learn the French.

On a positive note, it would appear that the following strategies/actions helped with understanding grammar:

– Collaborative group work;
– Initiative (strategic approach and asking for help);
– Confidence building via grammar analysis;
– Practice via diagnostic tests;
– Inspiration from peers;
– Explaining grammar to peers;
– Tailor-made materials (students commented positively on the chapter on sentences by Sinclair, 2007. pp. 55–74);
– 'Working out' grammar for yourself as part of the Grammar Task;
– 'Fun' with grammar;
– Metacognition.

The extract below illustrate that enjoying grammar analysis and adopting a process-based approach to its 'deconstruction' both appear to be key to understanding (Semi-Structured Interviews, March 2007):

Extract 2

P4: I like the analysis because it's also a bit of logic, like, not mathematics but it is kind of...there is a structure behind it obviously so I did enjoy analysing it and going into a deeper structure or deeper...I don't know.

I: and you've done this before have you? That kind of analysis?

P4: not really.

I: not really. But you quite enjoyed doing it? So nobody's really done it much before. Is that right? This is the first time you've had to do it.

P3: I did it a bit for English A-Level. Like you had to look at the different aspects of grammar but like never applying it to like a French text or anything, which is a bit different. .. it's like finding out for yourself, you learn a lot more.

As a consequence to findings in 2006–2007, it was decided to action the following changes for academic year 2007–2008:

1. Ask students for their definition of grammar both before *and* after the project to better explore the 'affective' and motivational dimensions relating to grammar learning (Krashen, 1981; Dörnyei, 2001).
2. Re-write the marking scheme for the collaborative component of the project to highlight the importance of grammar analysis.
3. Create a new marking scheme for the individual report.
4. Create new marking criteria for both components of the project (presentation and report).
5. Allocate a limited number of sentences chosen by the tutors.
6. Collaborate with Spanish and French tutors to reinforce grammar analysis and understanding.
7. Highlight common features in grammar amongst the languages studied (both native and target) as opposed to stressing the differences.
8. Provide examples of reflective discourse (Moon, 2004).
9. Make attendance compulsory for grammar sessions (change module descriptor).
10. Make students carry out the grammar analysis on paper before they start creating the website.

The above actions 1, 2, 5, 9, 7 and 10 appeared to work: students' grammar confidence was boosted in 2007–2008, the task appeared to have been understood better and the overall 'learning experience' during contact hours was enhanced by the fact that most students had attended regularly.

A further interesting finding emerged: although the stress during the grammar sessions had been on the identification of common underlying grammar principles amongst the three languages under study (English, French and Spanish), the comparison between textbooks highlighted the fact that there are some major differences in the grammar explanations in the textbooks used on the degree courses that could create confusion amongst students. It was in fact noticed that some English grammar manuals (like Thomson & Martinet, 1986, pp. 352, 338 and 337 and Swain, 1980, p. 480) distinguish between 'possessive adjectives' and 'possessive pronouns' and so do the French and Spanish textbooks (e.g. Kattan-Ibarra & Hawkins, p. 138), but some English grammar textbooks and course books for English linguistics and TEFL don't (e.g. Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, p. 105; Kuiper &

Scott Allan, 1996, which is the main mandatory textbook for students on Spanish/ French and TEFL), where both 'possessive pronouns' and 'possessive adjectives' are classified as 'possessive pronouns'.

The module leader therefore realised that the students who had taken English language/linguistics 'A' level (secondary school qualification in the UK after 4–5 years of studies) and were quite confident in their grammar analysis classified the 'sa' in 'sa vie' as a pronoun because this was the grammar definition they had been taught in English for 'his' in 'his life' either at school or by colleagues in English. Following consultation with members of staff in both languages and linguistics, it appeared that all languages staff (the *Academic Methods and Approaches* tutor included) felt very strongly that students should use the 'possessive adjective' definition and be taught how a 'possessive adjective' differs from a 'possessive pronoun', while the tutors in linguistics felt that the classification 'pronouns' should now be used for both. Needless to say that this 'epistemic ambiguity' caused some confusion amongst students, and made the understanding of some of the individual grammar categories within the threshold concept more troublesome. This critical incident highlighted that languages and linguistics tutors need to engage in a discussion on grammar terminology in order to implement a consistent approach to its teaching and make it less troublesome for students.

COMMON ISSUES ARISING IN BOTH 2006–2007 AND 2007–2008

Despite the difficulties encountered, the most positive result of the two cycles of actions carried out as part of the curricular intervention appeared to have made the understanding of some components of the threshold concept - morphemes and word classification - easier – even if some issues still remained with word classi- fication, mainly relating to the understanding of pronouns and adverbs. It was confirmed however that the understanding of clauses and phrases is still eluding many students who often failed to see the links between identifying the subject. verb and object in a simple sentence and identifying a clause.

In both years it was also observed that the weaker students did not read the carefully selected and structured literature on grammar provided by the lecturers both in class and online, but chose to find their own grammar material online. This resulted either in confusion and further 'grammar fear' or in false security inspired by non-academic web-sites providing incorrect information.

It emerged that students reading Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and a Language (e.g. Spanish and TEFL; French and TEFL) had an advantage over students on other degree combinations (e.g. Spanish and International Relations: French and Business). This was because the TEFL degree course is underpinned by grammar analysis of English in the first year and these students were therefore able to reinforce the grammar knowledge learned in *Methods and Approaches* in their other modules.

There was one particular student in the TEFL and Spanish group. mature and bilingual in Spanish and English, who scored '0' in each of the diagnostic tests he took at the beginning of the term in January 2008 and '80/100' at the end of term in

March 2008. In his case the crossing of the grammar threshold had been particularly visible as he moved from grammar fear – he had never studied grammar formally before - to grammar confidence in eight weeks. When interviewed, he explained that his 'eureka' grammar moment had happened during a lecture given by one lecturer in the English department who was explaining one of the fundamental components of the *rank scale* threshold concept – the phrase - on the mandatory English module *The Nature of Language*, at a time in which the student was carrying out the *Group Grammar Project* and struggling to 'see' the overarching structure of the sentences he was analysing. He decided to ask specifically for further clarifications on the concept of 'phrase' from the English lecturer after struggling with the deconstruction of his Spanish sentence. The English linguistics lecturer then explained that one way to check if a phrase is a phrase is to try and rearrange the phrases identified in a sentence to create a new sentence. If the new sentence still makes sense, the phrases have been identified correctly. This 'revelation' set the student on a path of grammar discovery and, as he put it to the interviewers (March 2008), in the end he could 'see' the grammar in a sentence - like the Matrix in the homonymous film: 'I could not see anything before. Now I look at a sentence and I can see grammar, it's there, it's like the Matrix' (Semi-structured interviews March 2008).

This above student's 'grammar journey' would appear to illustrate how for some students one of the abstract components of the *rank scale* threshold concept (the phrase) can be crossed via the support of concerted curricular actions, targeted assessment (both formative and summative), collaborative group work and metareflection. The abstract teaching on his linguistics module reinforced by his practice on the *Group Grammar Project* enabled him to 'see' the connection between theory and practice, to make the link that opened a new world of understanding to him and cross the threshold.

In view of the difficulties encountered by English-educated students in tackling the *rank scale* threshold concept and its individual troublesome components in a sentence both in English and in the target language(s) studied, it could be argued that more work on basic grammar concepts could be carried in schools before pupils reach the secondary level sector. Some of the interviewees pointed out that their grammar fear had been triggered by the fact that grammar was first mentioned to them in year 7. The ease with which most of the native French, German, Polish and Italian students in the two years tackled the analysis of the grammar categories in the sentences allocated for the *Group Grammar Project* would appear to be linked with having engaged with a considerable amount of formal grammar instruction from primary school level. This does not mean that their analysis was always correct, but they did not perceive the grammar analysis of sentences in the *Group Grammar Project* as a 'terrifying' task like so many of their English peers. Languages lecturers who have not been educated in England are not always fully aware of this 'grammar gap' and sometimes assume a basic level of 'meta-grammatical' knowledge on the part of their students. This would appear to add a 'cultural' dimension to the understanding (or not) of the threshold concept identified.

The research findings also corroborated the proposition that embedding metacognitive work into the teaching and learning of grammar via the *Group Grammar Project* had enhanced the students' ability to deal with troublesome grammar knowledge. In academic years 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 students had become better at self-diagnosing their grammar strengths and weaknesses in comparison with previous academic years. This was demonstrated by the fact that while in 2003–2005 there had been a wide discrepancy between the students' estimated mark for the grammar analysis and the real one, in 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 the students' predictions were quite accurate. It could be argued that this is a result of having offered students more opportunities for metareflection with the support of dedicated e-tools. During the interviews, in 2007–2008 in particular, most students stated that they now knew what to do to improve their grammar understanding. As previously highlighted, it could be argued that this is a positive step towards the crossing of the threshold concept. These findings would appear to indicate that encouraging students to 'metareflect' upon the threshold concept identified can trigger a 'self-assessment ontological shift' that will help them at least at the level of the 'estimation' and 'evaluation' (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008, pp. 70–71) of their position *vis a vis* the threshold concept and give them the confidence to at least assess their understanding of the 'protocol', 'the rules of the game'. So, although students might still be pre-liminal with reference to the concept itself, the confidence acquired via self-assessment will have prepared the ground for the ontological shift that can lead to the 'eureka' moment of grasping the concept.

CONCLUSION

The assessed task designed to help students with overcoming grammar fear, the *Group Grammar Project,* appears to have boosted grammar knowledge and confidence for most students, but many negative attitudes towards grammar 'nurtured' within the English school system are difficult to 'undo'.

However, in the cases in which the students started to understand how to analyse a sentence, the impact of the action-research-led curricular intervention illustrated here proved to be very beneficial and wide-ranging, also improving grammar performance and understanding in related modules, as reported by both the students and other colleagues in languages.

As already stressed, another emerging outcome will require further investigation. Although some students did not appear to improve their understanding of some of the threshold concept's components, they were better at self-assessing their understanding (or lack of) for each of them. So, while in previous years there had been a discrepancy between students' perception of progress and actual results (Orsini-Jones and Jones 2007: 100), in 2006–08 the students appeared to have a very accurate perception of their own grammar analysis proficiency. It would seem that the increase in the amount of work done at the 'metareflective' level improved the students' ability for accurate self-assessment in grammar understanding. It could be argued that this in turn had enhanced their 'preparedness' to embrace the

ontological shift necessary to cross the threshold. It could be argued that meta-reflection encouraged students to engage with their state of liminality towards the threshold identified in a positive and constructive way and helped with overcoming the paralysing 'fear of grammar' some had experienced at the beginning of the academic year.

The findings also confirm that the overarching structure of a sentence (*rank scale*) is a threshold concept for linguists and is (as from Meyer & Land, 2003 and 2005):

— Troublesome;
— Transformative;
— Integrative;
— Bounded.

However, as highlighted previously (Orsini-Jones, 2008, p. 224), its *irreversibility* is still under discussion, as during this action-research cycle, like in the 2003–2005 one, some students appeared to be able to grasp it for one language, but to be unable to transfer it across the other languages studied.

The analysis of the data from this study also confirms that the threshold concept identified is complex and cannot be crossed in one academic year by many students. Further explorations of long-term curricular interventions are needed to help students on languages further with grasping this concept.

APPENDIX 1

Translation of the poem 'L'infinito' – Infinity - by Giacomo Leopardi. The translation (slightly edited here) was found at http://www.tcm.phy.cam.ac.uk/~mdt26/poems/leopardi2.html

Always dear to me was this lonely hill,
And this hedge, which precludes the view of such a great a part
Of the farthest horizon.
But as I sit and watch
I figure in my mind the endless spaces beyond it, and the superhuman
silences, and the deepest quiet wherefore my heart
almost loses itself in fear. And as I hear the wind
rustle through these plants, I compare
that infinite silence to this voice:
and I recall to mind eternity,
And the dead seasons, and the current one
alive, and what it sounds like. So in this
Immensity my thoughts drown:
And it is sweet for me to shipwreck in this sea.

APPENDIX 2

Glossary for the *Group Grammar Project*

Morphemes

A morpheme can be defined as the smallest meaningful unit of language: a morpheme can only be further divided into sounds which do not carry any meaning.

Morphemes can be defined as:

- **free** – morphemes which can stand alone, e.g. "*strawberry*" consists of 2 free morphemes ("*straw*" and "*berry*")
- or **bound** – morphemes which cannot stand alone, e.g. "*unfortunately*" consists of 1 free morpheme ("*fortune*") and 3 bound morphemes
- ("*-un-*", "*-ate-*" and "*-ly*").

Bound morphemes can be further divided into:

- **inflection** – morphemes which add extra information to the basic word, e.g. "-s" in "runs" or "-ed" in "started".
- **derivation** – morphemes which change one word into another word of a different class, e.g. "*-ly*" in "*luckily*" or "*-ion*" in "*demonstration*".

A word consists of one or more morphemes.

Words

Words can be seen as the basic building blocks of language, and can be recognised in the written language by the space before and after each word.

There are 8 basic classes of word (also known as "parts of speech"):

- **verb** – sometimes defined as "doing" or "action" words, they can also indicate states or conditions. They are the central unit of a sentence, and can best be recognised grammatically, as they show tense as well as person and number.
- **noun** – sometimes described as "naming" or "object" words, they can also indicate abstract qualities. They accompany verbs and can again best be described grammatically: they show number and sometimes case, but not tense or person.
- **adjective** – usually accompany a noun, and qualify or modify the noun in some way. Sometimes defined as "describing" words.
- **adverb** – very hard to define as they are essentially the residual category: if a word doesn't fit any of the other definitions, it must be an adverb. They qualify or modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs or whole sentences.
- **pronoun** – words such as "*he*", "*she*", "*which*", "*them*". They stand in for and replace a noun.
- **preposition** – words such as "*for*", "*with*", "*in*", "*under*". They are placed before nouns or noun phrases to form preposition phrases.
- **article** – essentially three words in English: "*the*", "*a*", "*an*". In some languages they combine with some prepositions to form a single word.
- **conjunction** – words which join together two elements within a sentence, most commonly two nouns or noun phrases or two clauses. Words such as "*and*", "*because*", "*until*", "*while*".

Many words may function as 2 or more different parts of speech, depending on the context.
A phrase consists of one or more words.

Phrases

A phrase is a group of words which taken together form a meaningful unit. The function they perform in a clause or sentence can also be performed by a single word.

There are 5 basic types, each named after their main or "head" word:

- noun phrases
- verb phrases
- adjective phrases
- adverb phrases and
- preposition phrases

Pronouns are considered to be noun phrases, and articles never occur as head word of a phrase.
A clause consists of one or more phrases.

Clauses

A clause is a meaningful group of words which includes a verb, and is sometimes defined as a sentence within a sentence. Three basic types can be distinguished:

- **Main clause** - all sentences have at least one "main" clause, possibly more. If there is more than one main clause they are normally joined together by "*and*" or "*but*".
- **Subordinate clause** - a "subordinate" clause is one whose meaning depends on that of the main clause for a full interpretation, and they can be joined to the main clause by a variety of different conjunctions.
- **Reduced clause** - a "reduced " clause in one which does not have a complete verb phrase.

A clause can be divided into

- **subject**
- **verb**
- **object (direct or indirect)** and
- **adjunct**

It may have several adjuncts, but not more than one of the other elements. All clauses have a verb, and in some languages (such as English and French) **must** have a subject. They do not always have a direct and/or indirect object or any adjuncts. The subject determines the person and number of the verb.
A sentence consists of one or more clauses.

Sentences

Sentences are the largest units of language which have a grammatical structure. They normally start with a capital letter and end with a full stop (or question or exclamation mark).
Sentences can be:

- simple
- compound
- complex

Refer to Sinclair (2007) for further details on what simple, compound and complex sentences consist of.

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