Repurposing the grammar hammer

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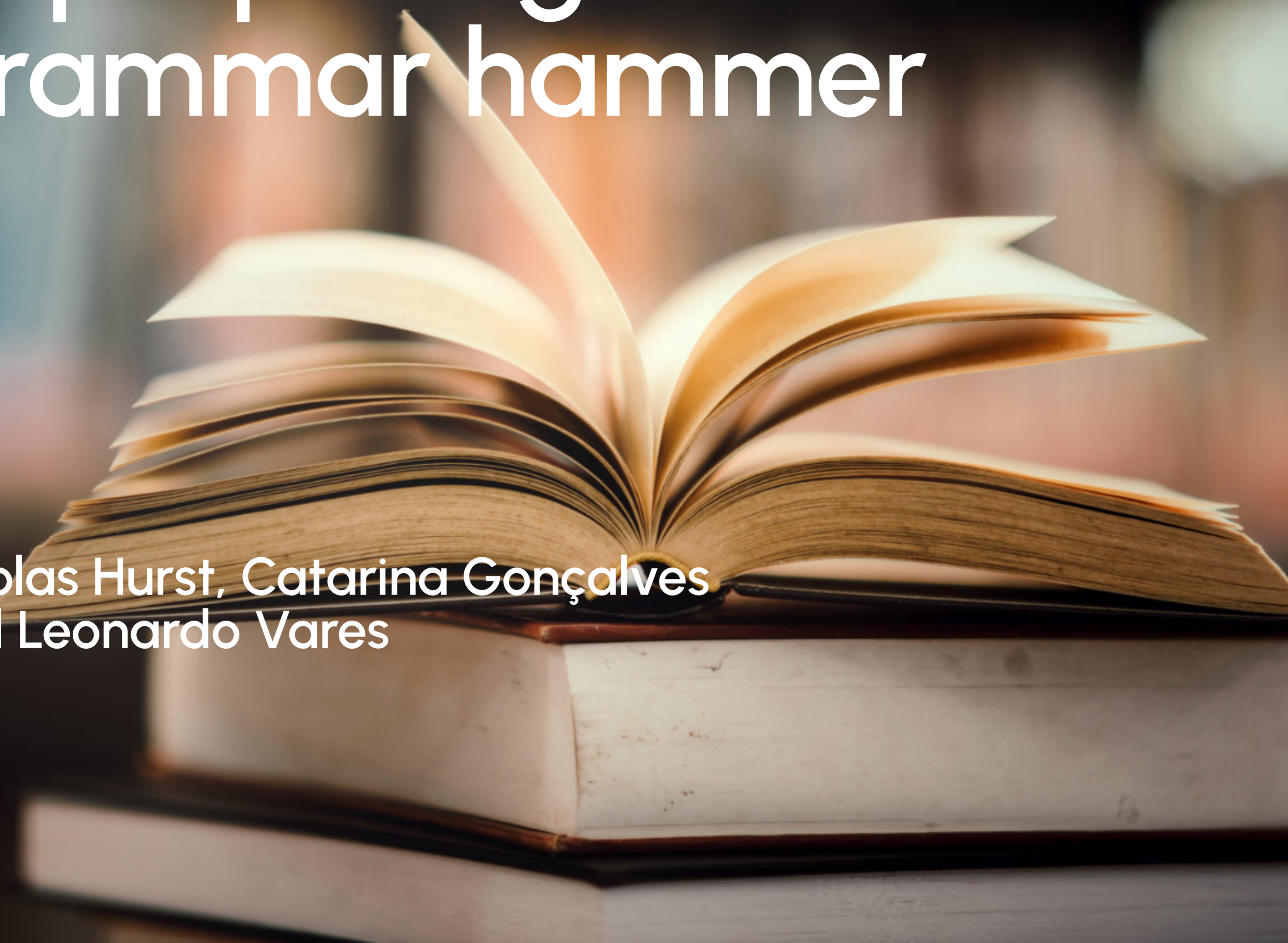
Introduction

Do English teachers think that students are able to use their existing grammatical knowledge to communicate their own meanings for their own purposes by the time they move into secondary level education?

To address this question, take "able" as actually having the ability to, rather than just possessing some knowledge. This is a key distinction because one's overall communicative competence is more than just a systemic knowledge of grammar. To communicate effectively, students must learn to apply this knowledge in appropriate contexts, which should be personally meaningful to them (Richards & Reppen, 2014). This is crucial in secondary education because it's the time when students are growing towards adulthood, so their language learning experience should help them understand the social nuances of communication.

Towards a principled approach

In order to 'do' grammar differently at secondary level, we take some guiding principles from Nunan (2003). First, teachers should employ not only deductive but also inductive methods of teaching grammar, i.e., not only presenting then practising grammatical structures, but also just presenting language input and having students try and discover rules or patterns by themselves. An advantage of the inductive method is that it calls for greater mental effort and more active participation, which can lead to more effective learning: "inductive techniques appear to result in learners retaining more of the language in the long term" (Nunan, 2003, p. 158).

Second, teachers should select, adapt and design materials (e.g., images, texts, videos) in a way that is appealing to their students, in view of their needs and interests. Third, all materials and exercises should be integrated in meaningful, communicative contexts; otherwise, students may learn, for instance, to transform a sentence from active to passive voice, without understanding when each is most appropriate. Fourth, there should be a focus on procedural knowledge over declarative knowledge (see Son, T.V. 2022), i.e., on applying language in communication rather than just knowing 'rules': "students must explore the meaning making function of grammar and find out how the various notions, relationships and shifts of focus are 'grammared' in English" (Bourke, 2005, p. 91).

In short, young adult learners (YALs) must learn to use the language rather than just manipulate isolated structures in exercises such as 'sentence transformations', or worse, just filling in the blanks. As Thornbury states "Communicative competence involves knowing how to use the grammar and vocabulary of the language to achieve communicative goals and knowing how to do this in a socially appropriate way" (2001, p. 18).

Tradition isn't what it used to be

Teachers and ELT coursebooks in Portugal have persisted in using the Presentation-Practice-Production framework (P-P-P) for teaching new language items. This article takes a stand against this 'tradition', especially at the secondary level, in view of a series of problems.

First, P-P-P is teacher-centred, i.e., it focuses on teaching rather than on learning. This means that there is little consideration of the learners' previous knowledge and current needs or of different types of learning. Second, the P-P-P model is synthetically structured in accordance with outdated structuralist principles, focusing predominantly on form over meaning, and is thus prescriptive and inflexible (Willis, 1994; Scrivener, 1996). Thus, P-P-P assumes a linear progression to learning, which does

not reflect the way that languages are learned, since in reality this process is emergent and recursive. Third, P-P-P isolates language items into 'bitesize' units, which does not make the most sense at secondary level education since by then YALs will have already been 'taught' this way for years. What they need instead are new, varied and challenging learning experiences.

As for the structure of P-P-P, the Presentation stage (P1) often takes up too much time, overplaying terminology and non-authentic examples, and the Practice stage (P2) often becomes the 'main course' of the lesson, making use of the exercises provided by the coursebook, which tend to be dubious, highly artificial and overly focused on accuracy. Both of these stages therefore reduce learner attention and motivation, which in turn hinders engagement and deep learning. Many students may switch off right at P1 because of the high teacher talking time (TTT), or at P2 because of its repetitive and predictable nature (e.g., multiple gap-fill exercises). Even when P1 and P2 go well, there is often not enough time left for the Production stage (P3), which is especially problematic because the main focus of the lesson should exactly be on production.

For these reasons, P-P-P is far from being in line with 21st-century conceptions of ELT, especially when applied incorrectly or when lessons do not go as planned. Moreover, even if all goes well, the heart of the matter is that P-P-P neither reflects the nature of language nor the nature of learning.

A less-travelled path

In Portugal, there are no official curricular requirements for teaching specific grammar items in English at the secondary level. There is no official 'grammar syllabus', only what coursebooks somehow carried over from previous arcane programmes dating from the early years of this century.

So, if teachers choose to abandon P-P-P at the secondary level, now in 2022, where does that take them? Let's take insights gained from a more task-based teaching/learning approach (see Jackson, 2022). So, we could make use of tasks that:

Correspond to the interests and real-world language needs of YALs, allowing them to make choices about content and outcomes.

Focus on integrating content and language, harnessing 'comprehensible input' combined with constructive feedback, producing enhanced output.

Focus on attaining fluency while considering specific features of English that prove challenging for Portuguese-speaking YALs.

Vary between 'information gap', 'problem solving', 'decision making', 'opinion exchange', and 'jigsaw activities', all of which encourage increased interaction and convergence with specified outcomes.

Require an 'above-sentence-level perspective', such as jumbled sentences that only make sense as a paragraph, or even jumbled paragraphs so that YALs focus on the relationships between grammar and meaning at discourse level.

Are designed primarily for speaking or writing, emerging from different contexts and text types, enabling the teacher to identify learner-generated areas of grammatical difficulty or doubt.

Promote active learner participation in social processes associated with real language use (e.g., turn-taking, reformulating, repair strategies), fostering pragmatic knowledge.

Align with 'critical language pedagogy' so that YALs can create their own meanings in discussing, e.g., the construction of identity, social justice, multiculturalism, global equality and solidarity, oppression and freedom, social media and consumerism, etc.

Conclusions

In secondary-level ELT classrooms, teachers should employ techniques and materials to teach grammatical content in a way so as to integrate it with the 21st-century skills of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (see Hurst et al, 2018). This is also explicit in the *Aprendizagens Essenciais*, which again do not specify which grammar items should be 'taught'.

The teaching of grammar for our YALs should focus on how, by combining their existing grammatical knowledge with that of other language elements (e.g., vocabulary, discourse features), they can produce personally meaningful spoken and written texts of different types. This implies a much more communicative approach that uses the learner as a resource and does not involve any explicit grammar presentations. YALs should be challenged to do much more than just manipulate isolated structures in non-communicative, so-called 'practice' exercises.

Perhaps the first step in discarding the 'grammar hammer' is to monitor the students' production and, as Richard and Reppen (2014) suggest, build up a database of difficulties that persist into the secondary cycle. This way, teachers can help students with what they need instead of imposing on them a redundant, outdated framework. Let's do some useful 'filling in the gaps' with our YALs: filling in the gaps in their existing competences, not 'teaching' them arbitrary grammar because the coursebook 'tells us' to.

Main references

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