



# Rethinking Grammar in the Foreign Language Classroom

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## Abstract

Current communicative language teaching differs sharply from many traditional approaches to in its exclusion of explicit grammar teaching. This exclusion allows class time to be focused on meaningful communication theoretically resulting in more proficient speakers of the target language. However, grammar still plays an important role in the communicative classroom, and the attempt to develop proficient speakers through communicative teaching is being hampered by adherence to a concept of grammar points that has not changed since the days of grammar-based approaches. Negative and indefinite expressions in Spanish provide a clear example in which a tenuous conceptual similarity between certain vocabulary items leads to unnecessary complexity in communicative settings. A more effective manner of teaching these expressions is to incorporate them at various points in the textbook as needed for communication, thus eliminating the grammar point altogether. By reexamining other grammar points that do not comprise any logical class in terms of acquisition or natural communication skills, the communicative approach to language teaching can be freed of hindrances that have been placed on it by outdated concepts of grammar.

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## 1 Introduction

The current focus on communicative language teaching in foreign language classrooms has de-emphasized or eliminated explicit grammar instruction. Recent discussion of focus on form notwithstanding, today's foreign language classroom would likely be unrecognizable to a student who studied her language under more traditional methods of foreign language teaching in which grammatical accuracy was the goal and creative communication was largely ignored. Concomitant to the communicative revolution has been a revision of class syllabi from form-focused to functional-notational and a reorganization of the foreign language textbook. A cursory glance at foreign language textbooks from the 1960s or 1970s reveals lifeless explanations of grammar points and multiple practice exercises to be written by the student. Today, we are fortunate to have textbooks that incorporate authentic texts in the target language, videos, CDROMs, and many activities that allow the student to create with their newly acquired language knowledge. Students practice the more mundane tasks like conjugating verbs through workbook exercises, while the classroom is reserved primarily for communication in the target language.

Language syllabi no longer look like a laundry list of grammar points. Rather, syllabi are typically organized by functions. For example, a chapter may introduce present tense verbs under the auspice

of talking about university activities. The student might watch a video in which a student describes his university life in one of the target cultures. The teacher might bring in pictures of various universities and incorporate appropriate vocabulary as she describes the various campuses. The students then may be asked questions about their daily lives at the university to immerse them in communication about topics that interest them and that are relevant to their lives. Present tense verbs are incorporated at this point to facilitate communication about university activities, but the grammar is not the focus of the lesson. This is the fashion in which most introductory foreign language courses are designed today.

Admittedly, the activities and strategies employed in a communicative classroom will differ from teacher to teacher. However, we can assume that the unifying concept underlying communicative language teaching is the incorporation of authentic communication. The students must have the opportunity to hear the target language being used in meaningful situations at a level appropriate to their stage of acquisition and be given the opportunity to communicate in the target language while carrying out tasks likely to be encountered in the target culture. The teacher must provide interesting, realistic input that also includes appropriate vocabulary and relevant grammatical structures.

While there seems to be some disagreement among language teachers on the role that grammar should play in communicative teaching, the concept of a grammar point itself is never questioned. Intuitively, any language teacher knows what the grammar of the target language looks like, and they are also acutely aware that certain grammar points cause students tremendous anxiety and frustration. However, I will argue here that some grammar points included in virtually every Spanish textbook are simply vestiges of older teaching methods in which communication was not an important goal. In fact, some grammar points actually undermine the guiding principles of a communicative approach, and a reorganization of the grammar in Spanish texts will allow for much more effective communication and language acquisition.

## 2 Negatives and Indefinites

In virtually all Spanish textbooks negative and indefinite words comprise a grammar section. This lesson typically includes most of the following vocabulary:

- (1) algo (something), nada (nothing), alguien (someone), nadie (nobody), siempre (always), nunca (never), alguno (some), ninguno (none, not one), o...o... (either...or...), ni...ni... (neither...nor...)

While these words may share the general concept of negation or indefiniteness, they are grammatically distinct. There is insufficient similarity among the grammatical structures in which the above words are often found to allow students to compare them to previously learned material or to develop some overarching strategy for learning these topics. Negatives and indefinites encompass disparate grammatical concepts. *Nada* and *algo* are frequently used as direct objects:

- (2) a. ¿Hay algo en la mesa?  
'Is there something on the table?'
- b. No, no hay nada.  
'No, there is nothing.'

*Alguien* and *nadie* are found in the same environment that any personal pronoun is found:

- (3) a. Alguien entró por la ventana. (subject)  
'Someone came in through the window.'
- b. ¿Viste a alguien? (direct object)

'Did you see anyone.'

- c. ¿Saliste con alguien? (object of preposition)  
'Did you go out with anyone?'
- d. ¿Le diste el dinero a alguien? (indirect object)  
'Did you give the money to someone.'

*Alguno* and *ninguno* function as adjectivals and therefore must agree in number and gender with the noun that they modify:

- (4) a. Hay algunos libros interesantes aquí.  
'There are some interesting books here.'
- b. No hay ningún programa interesante en la tele.  
'There is no interesting program on television.'

*Siempre* and *nunca* are adverbials:

- (5) a. ¿Siempre estudias en la biblioteca?  
'Do you always study at the library?'
- b. No hace su tarea nunca.  
'He never does his homework.'

A discussion of the subtleties of the use of each negative and indefinite word is not necessary here, but the brief examples in (2)-(5) illustrate the wide range of grammatical structures in which these words may be found. Grouping together these disparate vocabulary items makes the learning of negatives and indefinites an unnecessarily difficult task.

### 3 Two Major Concerns

There are really two crucial issues surrounding the presentation of negatives and indefinites. The first, as outlined above, involves the complexity of grammar that the students are required to master in order to fully understand the constraints on negatives and indefinites and incorporate them into their existing competence. The second concern involves the teacher's ability to incorporate these expressions into meaningful input. I will deal with each topic separately here, although there are certain aspects that overlap.

#### 3.1 Grammatical Complexity

Often a student who is struggling with a particular grammatical concept will search for related topics to review in order to make the topic more understandable. For example, a student may review subject pronouns before undertaking the study of stem-changing verbs. By thoroughly understanding the subject pronouns, much of the confusion surrounding the stem-changing verbs can be eliminated. A teacher can refer to the fact that the first person plural form does not show the stem change with the confidence that the students understand this information.

With many grammatical points presented in first-year Spanish courses, there are other clearly defined topics that will assist the student in learning the grammatical point. For example, a student might review the gender system of nouns before learning adjective agreement, or she might be

asked to review the endings for – AR verbs before learning the – ER and – IR endings. The review allows the student to form a foundation upon which to build. The new information can more easily be incorporated into a student's grammatical knowledge.

Now, consider the problem of negatives and indefinites. If a student were struggling with this particular grammar point, the teacher likely would not be able to clearly identify the source of the problem and the material to be presented as a review. The student could be struggling with adverb placement (*siempre, nunca*), subject pronouns and/or verb agreement (*alguien, nadie*), adjective agreement (*alguno, ninguno*), or even basic word order. Trying to understand all the grammatical subtleties of each of these negative and indefinite words is certainly an overwhelming task for a student. It involves having a thorough understanding of nearly every aspect of grammar covered to that point in the course and perhaps some that have yet to be addressed. Therefore, as I will outline in section 4, negatives and indefinites should not be grouped as a coherent grammatical concept.

### 3.2 Communicative Teaching and Negatives and Indefinites

The second, and perhaps more pressing, issue surrounding negatives and indefinites is the burden they place on the teacher in creating a communicative lesson. Negatives and indefinites lead the teacher into a rather awkward, unnatural type of communication. Exchanges like the following are often included in textbooks and used in communicative activities for negatives and indefinites:

- (6) a. ¿Hay algo en la mesa?  
'Is there something on the table?'  
  
No, no hay nada en la mesa.  
'No, there is nothing on the table.'
- b. ¿Alguien entró en la casa?  
'Did somebody enter the house?'  
  
No, nadie entró en la casa.  
'No, nobody entered the house.'
- c. ¿Hay algunos estudiantes en la biblioteca?  
'Are there any students in the library?'  
  
No, no hay ningún estudiante en la biblioteca.  
'No, there are no students in the library.'

This kind of questioning might occur in a comical police investigation, but it certainly does not imitate realistic communication to any reasonable degree. Furthermore, the grammatical structures are so diverse as to shift the focus away from the particular structure being practiced. Many student errors stem from the lack of comprehension of other structures, and the teacher cannot determine whether in the students truly understand the use of negatives and indefinites.

Furthermore, negatives and indefinites do not lend themselves to interesting, meaningful content. That is, not only are exercises with negatives and indefinites unnatural, they are also uninteresting. It merely becomes an exercise in negating whatever the teacher asks without regard to the actual communication of information. Certainly, exercises can be designed that allow students to communicate a certain amount of information, but relatively little can be done to expand these grammatical structures into a creative, interesting lesson in which the students are immersed in the language and are focused on content rather than on form.

## 4 A Communicative Alternative to Negatives and Indefinites

Since I have argued that negatives and indefinites do not form a coherent grammar point, I will suggest a different manner of incorporating negatives and indefinites into a communicative classroom. If we accept that a student can most easily incorporate new structures into her existing competence when she has the opportunity to use them in meaningful conversation, negative and indefinite expressions can easily be redistributed throughout introductory Spanish textbooks at the point that the student most likely needs these words to communicate. In fact, the most productive manner in which to incorporate *nadie* and *alguien* into an introductory Spanish course is to include them with the subject pronouns and present tense verbs. Certainly, there is relatively little difference conceptually or grammatically between the following:

- (7) a. Carlos habla español.  
'Carlos speaks Spanish.'
- b. Nadie habla español.  
'No one speaks Spanish.'

In both (7)a and b, the subject triggers third person singular verb agreement. Furthermore, at the point that a student is beginning to comprehend verb conjugations and talk about various people performing actions, the need to explain that no one or someone performed an action is great. The following exchange would seem quite natural in a classroom in which the topic centers on activities at home:

- (8) Professor: ¿Quién limpia el baño en tu casa?  
'Who cleans the bathroom in your house?'
- Student: Nadie limpia el baño en mi casa.  
'No one cleans the bathroom in my house.'
- Professor: ¿Cómo? Alguien tiene que limpiar el baño, ¿no?  
'What? Someone must clean the bathroom, right?'

Clearly, the above conversation is a natural exchange in which the function of *nadie* and *alguien* are inferable from context. At the point that the students are able to use subject pronouns and conjugate basic verb forms, *nadie* and *alguien* become crucial for communication, and therefore can easily be incorporated into comprehensible input by the teacher. By waiting until later chapters to introduce these expressions, as most textbooks do, the students will often resort to awkward expressions such as *\*no persona* 'no person' or *\*cero personas* 'zero people' in an attempt to express the relatively straightforward *nadie*. The fact that they must resort to these other expressions shows that they are ready to acquire the use of *alguien* and *nadie* and need them for realistic communication.

In fact, all of the negative and indefinite words can be incorporated into the textbook in a much more efficient, natural fashion. The use of *alguno(s)* and *ninguno* can be introduced with indefinite articles, facilitating natural communication such as in (9):

- (9) Teacher: ¿Hay unos libros en la mesa?  
'Are there some books on the table?'
- Student: No, no hay ningún libro en la mesa.  
'No, there is no book (not one book) on the table.'

The adverbials *siempre* and *nunca* can easily be introduced as new vocabulary as students learn to use verbal morphology because it is often necessary to explain how often one performs an action. It is hardly difficult for a student who has mastered basic verb forms to place *siempre* at the end of an utterance to indicate that performs an action with great frequency.

The picture that emerges here is one in which the entire section of negative and indefinite expressions can be eliminated as a grammar point and the individual vocabulary words that usually comprise this section can simply be integrated into the communicative textbook at the points that they facilitate communication.

## 5 Testing Concerns

Another important concern for teachers and students is the testing of various grammatical points. It has been my experience that the negatives and indefinites are an extremely difficult topic to test accurately. Many students struggle to prepare for an exam over this topic because the expressions cover such a wide array of grammatical points and do not lend themselves to any kind of straightforward testing format. Generally, an exam section on negatives and indefinites will resemble the following:

(10) Answer the following questions negatively:

- a. ¿Hay alguien en la casa? No, no hay nadie.  
'Is there someone in the house? No, there is no one.'
- b. ¿Hay algunos libros en la mesa? No, no hay ninguno.  
'Are there any books on the table? No, there are none.'
- c. ¿Siempre estudias en casa? No, nunca estudio en casa.  
'Do you always study at home? No, I never study at home.'

This kind of format forces the student into a predictable pattern in which they simply produce the opposite word from the one they find in the question. This is certainly not consistent with a communicative approach to language teaching. This is nothing more than a type of problem solving and stimulus-response learning reminiscent of the older audiolingual and grammar-translation methods. Thus, by incorporating negatives and indefinites as one grammatical concept, the communicative approach actually breaks down.

## 6 Conclusion

I believe that this analysis of negatives and indefinites within a communicative approach addresses one of the fundamental problems underlying the teaching of introductory language courses: the grammar reflects assumptions made by traditional approaches to language teaching. Our approach to teaching has changed, but the organization of the grammar has not. In many ways we are attempting to force certain grammatical concepts into a communicative classroom and forcing the teacher into providing awkward, unrealistic communication. The suggestions I have provided here for negatives and indefinites is intended to offer a point of departure from which many different grammatical concepts can be re-evaluated in the communicative classroom.

The contrast between the Spanish prepositions *por* and *para*, both of which often translate to the English to, is another example of a grammar point that can be restructured. The lesson on *por* and *para* often forces students into a strange communicative circumstance in which one or the other of

the prepositions is used in every sentence. There are multiple uses of each preposition, and attempting to sort through them all while communicating in a meaningful fashion places undue burden on the student. Since each of these prepositions has many different functions, they should be incorporated throughout the language textbook so that the students can be exposed to the various uses in realistic contexts. For example, if a chapter were based on the vocabulary of shopping and clothing, the student would have little trouble understanding and internalizing questions like (11):

- (11) ¿Cuánto pagaste por esa blusa?  
'How much did you pay for that blouse?'

The student could incorporate the function of *por* (exchange for money) into his competence without needing extensive lists contrasting the functions of *por* and *para* that often cause only more confusion.

In fact, it is not unreasonable to think that a major reorganization in the structuring of grammar in communicative language textbooks must take place to maximize the benefits of a communicative classroom. Teachers intuitively know that certain chapters and certain grammar points are typically problematic for students and teachers alike. However, as I have shown here, this need not always be the case. Negatives and indefinites do not need to be a problematic grammatical point. In fact, they do not need to be a grammatical point at all. The decision about what constitutes a grammar point is often arbitrary and based on outdated assumptions. Intense scrutiny of the grammar of each language as currently conceived in foreign language teaching can lead to much more effective textbooks and far more successful foreign language acquisition in communicative settings.

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