

## The Presence of Traditional Grammar in English Language Didactic Materials

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### Abstract

Brazil's National Curricular Common Base (NCCB), a document that establishes the core guidelines for basic education throughout the country, is in line with the vision of linguistic functionalism by recommending that the teaching of both Portuguese and English languages be guided by the use that speakers make of them and, essentially, that the contents are exposed in a contextualized way, in addition to bringing examples close to the students' daily lives. Despite this, the "traditional paradigm of grammatization" (Vieira, 2018) still prevails in many classrooms, with its epistemological guidelines that privileges the metalinguistic teaching of the "correct" and "ideal" language. The empirical material for analysis of this research consists of the English textbook for the 9th grade of elementary school, from the Ari de Sá Teaching System, widely used by private schools in João Pessoa, capital of Paraíba, in northeastern Brazil. It was sought to verify if the explanation of a specific topic, the Reported Speech, was restricted to a prescriptive formalist perspective or if functionalist characteristics were also included, associating the language with the communicative act in a contextualized way. The results demonstrate that, when approaching this content, it is highlighted the traditional paradigm of grammatization, centered in the uncontextualized utterance, with no insertion of linguistic knowledge of the text and discourse.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language; Traditional Grammar; Didactic Material Analysis.

### 1. Introduction

This article assumes that Traditional Grammar (TG) is a Linguistic maxi-theory (Vieira, 2020), expanding the scope of linguistic science and considering that studies on language, prior to the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, often considered the starting point of the area, are also part, in a broad sense, of what is understood by linguistic science.

Traditional Grammar, in general, has permeated the study of western languages for several centuries. This predominance occurs with regard to teaching not only in the case of the mother tongue, but also in the study of foreign languages.

With the advancement of studies in linguistics, especially after the 1970s, with the so-called "linguistic turn", this overstated or exclusively usage focused on the metalinguistic analysis of the utterance and on prescribing norms and rules began to be questioned. This is because TG comprises, in its epistemological guidelines, a search for an idealized grammatical pattern, centered in an old literature, which is far from the use that the vast majority of people make of the language. In the Brazilian context, speech variations, for example, are not usually considered, as the TG establishes as role models Portuguese-speaking authors from the 19th century and even earlier (Vieira, 2020).

In this sense, Martelotta (2011) states that much of the linguists' criticism of TG is precisely the fact that it does not consider alternative constructions to the standard, since "the use of language is not governed, at least in essence, by the standards of correction" (p. 47). In other words, it is natural that there are changes in languages, due to timeframe and context, as well as it is natural that variants arise, which must be presented when teaching languages.

In the Brazilian context, one can consider the desire to break with the purely prescriptive grammar when it was established, in the National Curricular Parameters –NCP, the enunciative-discursive perspective of language, later

reinforced in 2017, when the then the government issued the National Curricular Common Base (NCCB), a normative document that defines the set of essential learning that students from all over Brazil must acquire in basic education. Both documents assume “the centrality of the text as a work unit and the enunciative-discursive perspectives in the approach, in order to always relate the texts to their contexts of production” (Brasil, 2017, p. 67). Specifically on the English language, the object of study of this research, the NCCB also presents proposals that prioritize the focus of the social and political function of the language and encourages that “the uses made of it by speakers spread all over the world” be “welcomed and legitimized” (Brasil, 2017, p. 241).

In other words, the NCCB proposes a functionalist approach as opposed to a formalist one, where TG is included. Despite this, this article aimed to exemplify how TG is still present today in Didactic Materials (DM), adopted in Brazilian schools. More specifically, this research aimed to verify how a book, used in English language teaching in elementary institutions, deals with grammatical issues. That is, are the explanations present in the DM restricted to a prescriptive formalist perspective or are functionalist characteristics also presented, associating grammar with the communicative act of the speakers, as recommended by the NCCB?

In order to carry out the present study, the English language book, organized by Padu Machado, from the Ari de Sá Teaching System (SAS), from the 9th grade of elementary school was analyzed. The choice for this material was due to the large number of private schools that adopt the SAS System books in the city of João Pessoa, capital of the state of Paraíba, in Brazil: three of the five schools with the highest averages in the National High School Exam (ENEM) in 2019, according to INEP data<sup>1</sup>, use the SAS System didactic material.

This article is divided into four sections in addition to these initial considerations. The next two concerns the theoretical foundation, in which the guiding principles of the research are detailed. Then, the methodological course carried out is outlined and, in the sequence, the excerpts of the didactic material chosen for analysis are presented and discussed. At last, final considerations are made.

## 2. The Hegemony of Traditional Grammar

Traditional Grammar is the oldest linguistic theory when it comes to language study. Articulating two dimensions, the standard-norm axis (set of idealized rules) and the metalinguistic analysis axis (phonetics, morphology and syntax), it predominated alone in teaching materials and in classrooms for centuries. As of grammar, several authors have undertaken the mission of defining the term. Martelotta (2011) characterizes it as the “set of interpretations and descriptions about the functioning of the language” (p. 44). In the same line of thought, Moura Neves (2012, p. 586) points out that the term is related to the “apparatus that arranges the meanings of language, which joins the pieces in a multiply governed complex”.

In turn, Azeredo (2008) considers grammar essential in the formal construction of the text which, orderly, “is based on the system of units and combinatory rules that we call grammar” (p. 124). Further on, the author adds that the grammar of a language is constituted by the “set of processes that regulate the correspondence between the construction of linguistic forms and their respective meanings” (p. 125). Furthermore, Vieira (2020) warns that there are, in practice, at least five different meanings for what is meant by the term *Traditional Grammar*. It can mean: a book, a content or teaching methodology, a non-scientific doctrine, one of the grammar types, a discipline, or an area of knowledge. The concern about grammar, in the view of Martelotta (2011, p.) began in ancient Greece, as the Greeks had a philosophical interest in language. For the author, they “[...] were interested in studying language, among other reasons, because they wanted to understand some aspects associated with the relationship between language, thought and reality”. Lyons (1979) corroborates this origin and adds that “for the Greeks 'grammar' was from the beginning a part of 'philosophy'” (p.4).

It would have been in Alexandria, therefore, the emergence of the first Greek grammar, that of Dionysius Thrax, at the end of the 2nd century BC, a grammaticographic model that was followed by the Romans for the elaboration of the Latin grammars of Varrão, Donato and Prisciano, which were widely used in middle age. he

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<sup>1</sup>Retrieved from: <https://enem2019.evolutcional.com.br/RD.html>. Acesso: jan. 20, 2022.

literature (Lyons, 1979; Vieira, 2018). With the hegemony of the Catholic Church in the medieval era, pure Latin acquires even more prestige and becomes considered a universal language. In this way, the Latin grammars served as inspiration for the elaboration of other grammars (Martelotta, 2011).

In the Renaissance period, in France, as stated by Lyons (1979), the Port-Royal Grammar was created in 1660, “whose aim was to demonstrate that the structure of language was a product of reason, and that different languages were only varieties of a more general logical and rational system” (Lyons, 1979, p. 17-18). About this work, Vieira (2018) emphasizes that it is “an important milestone in the history of the constitution of the grammars of European languages and, in particular, of the standardization of the French language, based on many other grammars of the ideas disseminated by it” (p. 126).

The focus of the search for the ideal language only changed with the emergence of historical-comparative linguistics, which developed throughout the 19th century in Europe, giving rise to comparative grammars (Bossaglia, 2019). Now the researchers sought for the mother tongue, making comparisons between the languages that were known. Even so, Vieira (2018) reinforces that the historical-comparatist orientation, the structuralists and generativists studies, as well as the functionalist approaches, only started to represent significant changes in the Brazilian grammatization pattern with the elaboration, by linguists, of contemporary Brazilian grammars (Faraco & Vieira, 2016).

### **3. The pragmatic/linguistic turn**

From the 1970s onwards, the so-called “linguistic turn” began to take shape in Brazil, in order to question the teaching of Portuguese based merely on formalism, prescriptivism, and grammatical metalanguage. For Bentes (2001) this transformation of linguistic science began when the analysis stopped at the sentence level and went further, with studies on the text.

According to Fregonezi (2000), there were some factors that caused this paradigm shift in Portuguese language teaching: first, in 1961, the enactment of the law that changed from three to five weekly classes dedicated to the language, a fact that promoted more time for teachers to other issues besides the linguistic formalism in force until then. Further on, the author also emphasizes the dissemination of the National Curricular Parameters (NCP) that gave emphasis to textual studies, provoking the “teaching of Portuguese through texts” (p. 10).

Vieira (2018) states that, to date, prescriptive normative grammars are present in textbooks used in Brazilian schools. Despite this, the author recognizes that there have been changes: “it would only be in the 21st century that Brazilian grammars, now developed by linguists, would move away, as far as possible, from the traditional grammatization model” (p.145). In this sense, Bentes (2001) also points out the emergence of textual grammars that “arose with the purpose of reflecting on inexplicable linguistic phenomena through a grammar of the utterance” (p. 263). Further on, the author reports that scholars began to investigate the functioning and the understanding of texts in use, that is, within certain pragmatic contexts.

Thus, the late 1970s saw the emergence of the notion of textuality (Marcuschi, 2008) when language started to be seen “as a current system, in effective use in communicative contexts” (Bentes, 2001, p. 266). Despite all these theoretical shifts mentioned above, Vieira (2018) considers that they were not enough to constitute “a new paradigm of grammatization that would erase the theoretical basis and ideological affiliation to the features of the Greco-Roman and of Lusitanian grammar” (p. 237).

In view of the above, the analysis of the selected teaching material, as explained below, corroborates the perception that both in the mother tongue (Portuguese), and in an additional language (English), the prescriptive and normative habit still present in many teaching materials, although, in some cases, the insertion of contextualized elements of use is observed.

#### 4. Methodological Course

After establishing the research objective, planning began with a review of the literature regarding linguistic analysis practices as opposed to the teaching of traditional grammar. With the identification and location of relevant content, the selection methodology proposed by Gil (2021) was followed, initially carrying out an exploratory reading in order to “decide on the convenience of reading the material or part of it”. Then, selective reading was carried out to “select the parts of the text of greatest interest”, in view of the objectives outlined previously. The next procedure consisted of analytical reading in the direction of “order and summarize the information contained in the sources, in a way that makes it possible to obtain research responses”. Finally, an interpretative reading was carried out, aiming to “establish a relationship between the content of sources and content obtained from other sources” (p. 80). Thus, several documents were consulted, such as articles, theses, and dissertations, as well as reference books and manuals in the area of Linguistics.

##### 4.1 Choice of teaching material for analysis

Some criteria were considered to select which textbook would be used for analysis. The first of these was the availability of access, including material intended for teachers. In addition, with a view to give greater relevance to the research, the work should be of great use within a certain segment or location. To meet these requirements, we opted for the book for the 9th year of the final years of elementary school, whose title is: English, organized by Padu Machado, from Ari de Sá Teaching System (SAS), as shown in Figure 1 that follows. It was found that the SAS System is present in a large number of private schools in the city of João Pessoa, capital of the state of Paraíba and, in addition, three of the five schools with the highest averages in the National High School Exam in 2019 adopted the textbooks of this publisher in the year 2021.

#### 5 Analysis of Teaching Material

Among teachers and language scholars, there is an incessant debate about whether to teach grammar in foreign language classes and about the extent to which the teaching of grammatical content leads students to be effective speakers and to develop sufficient linguistic-grammatical competence to communicate in a foreign language. The NCCB suggests an answer to this dilemma by establishing that, in the teaching of English, the axis “linguistic knowledge” is consolidated by usage practices, and should, therefore, lead the student to reflect on the language within its context, in a way for them to discover the systemic functioning of English.

In addition to defining what is right and what is wrong, these findings should provide reflections on notions such as 'adequacy', 'standard', 'linguistic variation' and 'intelligibility', leading the student to think about the uses of the English language, questioning, for example: “Would this way of using English be appropriate from whose perspective? [...]” (Brasil, 2017, p. 245). In this way, it is observed that both the advanced studies of textual and functional linguistics, as well as the normative instruments, suggest that the teaching of the English language be guided by its use, in a contextualized way, moving away from the requirements of the TG.

Despite this, the exposition of rules unrelated to a clear situation is constant in DMs. Regarding the teaching of English, Lamb Fenner and Corbari (2004) point out that in many schools, with the contribution of textbooks, the isolated teaching of grammar is observed, unrelated to the contexts in which the discourses were produced. In this sense, Widdowson (1988) made a great contribution by differently conceptualizing *use*, as opposed to *usage*. The author used the term *usage* to refer to the grammatical form, the employment or potential use of sentences, while *use* was referred to the communicative use, the actual use of sentences. With that, Widdowson argued that in the teaching of English these two aspects should be considered.

The subject chosen for this research was the use of Reported Speech, as it is directly related to communication, interaction and favors the description of the context of use. However, as will be shown, DM only brings the *usage* face of the language, with rules to be followed.

Figure 1 – Reported Speech: Introduction

**LANGUAGE ARENA**

1. Read the sentences below and do the activities that follow.
 

The doctor said, "Some kids **are eating** too much fast food."

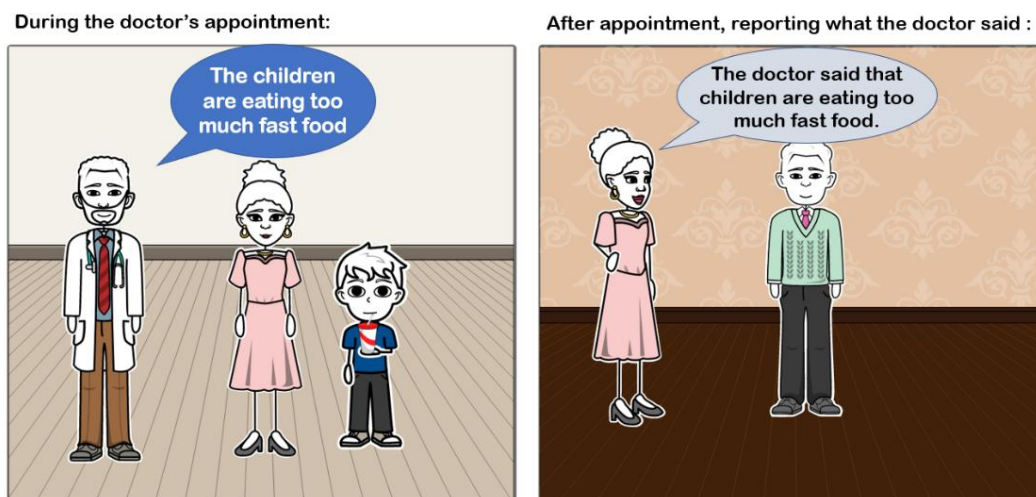
The doctor said (that) some kids **were eating** too much fast food.
2. Choose the best options to complete the sentences.
  - a) When we report someone's words, we can do it in two ways:
    - we can use **direct / reported** speech with quotation marks.
    - or we can use **direct / reported** speech.
  - b) When we use reported speech, there are usually changes in **pronouns / adjectives** and **nouns / verb tenses**.

Source: Machado, 2019, p. 110.

As shown in Figure 1, a sentence is presented in direct order and next to it its transformation into indirect speech. Then there is an explanation on the topic, in which students must circle a correct option to form the definitions. Alternative 2b clarifies that there are, *usually* changes in pronouns and verb tenses, however, situations in which there is no change, for example, in verb tenses, are not shown at any time.

It is known that indirect speech is used when reporting something that has been said by another person and, obviously, several factors must be considered when performing this task. In the example given in this introduction, "The doctor said, 'some kids are eating too much fast food', the change from the simple present to the simple past in the reported speech was presented, as if it was the only way to report this speech. However, the possibility of keeping the sentence in the present tense is not shown. As it is known, there are situations, for example, if it is reported in a near period of time, probably the present tense would be more appropriate. By predicting only the simple past use, it is assumed that the action no longer happens, that is, that the doctor claims that the children ate fast food in the past, but that they do not currently eat it. The situation represented in the comics of figure 2, created for this research, shows a possible dialogue to be presented in a didactic material:

Figure 2 – Reported Speech: usage



Source: Author's own work (2022).

Thus, the context of use of the sentence presented by the DM is quite relevant for the use of indirect speech, as it can determine the change or not of the verb tense. However, the book opts for the use of substitution tables, without there being a situation or explanation for such changes to happen, as shown in figure 1 previously displayed. This is a characteristic of prescriptive instruments, which do not promote student reflection, recommended by the NCCB, limiting you to just memorizing rules.

Below, in figure 3, there is a description, in Portuguese, about the use of the Reported Speech. There is a comparison between direct and indirect speech. According to the book, in direct speech you use the same words previously said with quotations. As of the indirect speech, it mentions that one should modify “some words” in order to report what was said. There is no information, in this part, about keeping some words, depending on the context.

Figure 3 – *Reported Speech Description*

**Reported Speech**

Para relatar o que alguém disse, você pode utilizar o *direct speech* (discurso direto) ou o *reported speech* (discurso indireto).

No *direct speech*, você deve repetir o que foi dito usando as mesmas palavras da pessoa, por meio de aspas.

- She looked at her mother when she was 11 and said, **"I want to change my eating habits."**

Já no *reported speech*, não se usa aspas e é necessário modificar algumas palavras para relatar o que foi dito.

- She looked at her mother when she was 11 and said **(that) she wanted to change her eating habits.**

Pronomes pessoais, possessivos, advérbios de tempo e de lugar também podem ser alterados com a passagem do discurso direto para o indireto.

Direct speech	Reported speech
I	he/she
we	they
me	him/her
this	that
these	those
here	there
today	the day before
tonight	last night
tomorrow	the next day/the following day

Os verbos geralmente mudam seu tempo verbal. Veja a tabela a seguir.

Direct speech	Reported speech
Present Simple	Past Simple
Present Continuous	Past Continuous
Present Perfect	Past Perfect
Past Simple	Past Perfect
Future (will)	Future in the past (would)
Past Perfect	Past Perfect

Se a ação expressa na fala ainda é verdadeira no presente, mantenha o verbo no seu tempo verbal original.

- I buy my groceries at the local farmer's market.
- He said (that) he buys his groceries at the local farmer's market.

Source: Machado, 2019, p. 110.

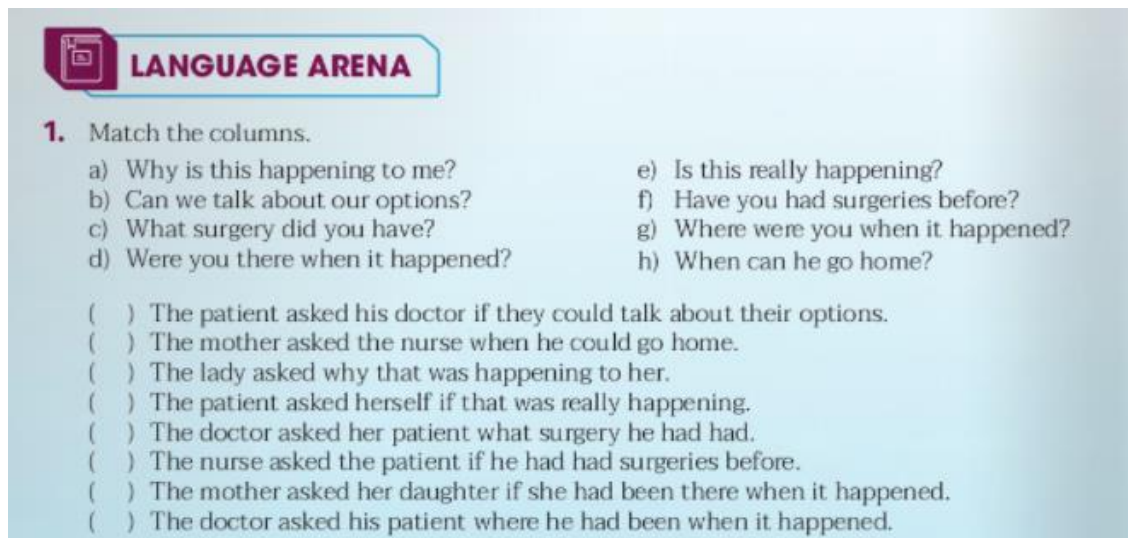
Put this way, the DM clearly expresses the normative position by establishing a value judgment, considering any other answers that are outside the “table of equivalences” as “wrong”. Furthermore, the analysis is limited to the sentence, without explaining the context of use in which the speech is inserted, reinforcing the grammatical traditions that, according to Furtado da Cunha and Tavares (2016) “have been transmitted in schools in a degenerate, fragmentary, dogmatic, prescriptive and thoughtless way” (p.13-14).

Many books bring practices such as mechanical translation or the simple repetition of grammatical forms without raising awareness on the part of the students, who most of the time just copy models, without even knowing what



they are doing or why they are doing it, because the DMs cover the exclusive task of “teaching forms of the linguistic system, without any relation to the elements that are part of the student's life” (Celani, 1989, p. 27). Figure 4, in sequence, shows an example of this positioning when listing loose questions, unrelated to each other, where students are led to associate them with their indirect forms.

Figure 4 – *Reported Speech* in questions



**LANGUAGE ARENA**

1. Match the columns.

a) Why is this happening to me?	e) Is this really happening?
b) Can we talk about our options?	f) Have you had surgeries before?
c) What surgery did you have?	g) Where were you when it happened?
d) Were you there when it happened?	h) When can he go home?

( ) The patient asked his doctor if they could talk about their options.  
 ( ) The mother asked the nurse when he could go home.  
 ( ) The lady asked why that was happening to her.  
 ( ) The patient asked herself if that was really happening.  
 ( ) The doctor asked her patient what surgery he had had.  
 ( ) The nurse asked the patient if he had had surgeries before.  
 ( ) The mother asked her daughter if she had been there when it happened.  
 ( ) The doctor asked his patient where he had been when it happened.

Source: Machado, 2019, p. 118.

At no time, before or after this activity, there is any information that justifies the speakers' choices in the sentences that are in the reported speech. The patient, the mother, the lady, etc. were randomly placed in the indirect phrases. How can students know who asked the questions in letters a – h? In what situation will students use the content presented in this activity?

In this sense, Lamb Fenner and Corbari (2004) warn against decontextualized and artificial sentences, such as *the patient asked herself if that was really happening*, present in figure 4. This is an example of a sentence “correct from the point of view of linguistic rules, potentially usable, but, effectively, its occurrence is rare. It has a meaning, but its value is irrelevant because it is rarely used in an actual communication situation” (p. 3).

## 5. Final Considerations

It is widely known how difficult it is to break a paradigm, especially those that have persisted for millennia, such as grammar tradition. Furthermore, it is understood that the linguistic postulates inherited from the linguistic turn are relatively recent. However, there seems to be a consensus regarding the need of changing in the standard for language teaching, given the low performance of students today.

It is also considered that there is already vast academic research that favors the practice of linguistic analysis, since the interactive-textual approach has been shown to be more effective, to the detriment of the teaching of grammatical metalanguages.

In view of the above, it is clear that although the NCCB proposal for the English language in the final years of elementary school attaches proper importance to carrying out reflection activities focused on the use that speakers can make of the language in different contexts in general, the teaching of English, as evidenced by the teaching material analyzed in this article, is still tied to the traditional pattern of prescriptive-normative grammar. In short, even though it is undeniable the increasing effort of contemporary linguistics to turn to the analysis of everyday utterances of speakers of a language, which could contribute to improving the quality of teaching, the results of these research show that this kind of approach is still far from being widely seen inside classrooms.

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