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Defying established practice in the EFL classroom: the development of a theoretical framework for teaching and testing SE periphrastic verbs

ABSTRACT

The English as a Foreign Language unit at the Centre for Language Learning at the UWI St. Augustine campus is strategic to the institution's goal of global reach and impact in its provision of EFL to international corporations and students, in particular to those who matriculate into the university. Its policies match established standards in the field, its courses are delivered by qualified staff, and its involvement in the postgraduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Diploma predisposes it to reflective practice.

This study at the Centre for Language Learning investigated the ways in which EFL learners (n=26) processed and retrieved SE periphrastic verbs in the communicative language classroom where, based on an understanding of SLA (second language acquisition) as a complex (Larsen-Freeman, 1991) and dynamic system (De Bot, Wander and Verspoor, 2007), errors signal language development. Using a grounded action research methodology (Wiśniewska, 2011), formal and informal written assessments were examined. Results showed that learners do not conceptualize periphrastic verb forms as single forms set to be mapped onto functions, but instead, they systematically process how these are to be compiled. This challenged mainstream resources, which appeared to be uninformed by learner language, and existing theoretical constructs on interlanguage development which prioritize form-function mapping and deny that the stage prior to this is systematic. In 2012 these findings inspired the development and application of a pedagogical scheme which reaped results superior to those recorded when mainstream resources were relied upon for teaching and testing.

Keywords: Amina Ibrahim-Ali; SE periphrastic verbs; focus on form; language pedagogy.

Introduction

As the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) unit at the UWI St. Augustine campus commemorates its 25th year in operation, it is useful to acknowledge its role in enhancing the institution's global reach and impact, defined as one of the key goals in the University's 2012-2017 strategic plan. Custom-designed on- and off-site courses in business and general English are delivered on request to managers and employees of international companies such as PDVSA — Petroleos de Venezuela, Unilever Trinidad Limited, Neal and Massy Wood Group Limited, Tetra Pak, Arcelor Mittal, Construtora OAS Ltda, Citibank and discussions are currently under way to mount courses for employees of Repsol. In 2009/2010 English for Medical Purposes was delivered to Cuban health-care professionals who were engaged by the government of Trinidad and Tobago to fill staff vacancies in the healthcare system. The EFL unit supported exchange programmes between the UWI and foreign universities through its provision of English language tuition (ELT) to staff members of Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, and Universidad Javeriana in Cali, Colombia, and, in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, it provided ELT to displaced Haitian students who completed their undergraduate degree programmes on the St. Augustine campus. Between 2012 and early 2015 ELT was made available to participants in CARPIMS (the Caribbean-Pacific Island Mobility Scheme), a scholarship programme managed by the campus Office of Institutional Advancement and Internationalization. Non-native speakers of English who require an overall band score of 6.5 in IELTS (International English Language Testing Systems) to matriculate into the university also enrol for EFL. In February 2015 the unit was approached by the International Office & Grant Funding of the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) to discuss the possibility of non-English speaking students enrolling in EFL courses before matriculating into UTT.

EFL on the St. Augustine campus was established as part of a programme which accommodated non-native speakers and trained teachers of this non-native clientele through its postgraduate diploma in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Its courses are delivered by qualified staff and its policies are shaped by what is relevant in the field. The language classroom, for instance, is communicative; fluency is encouraged through tasks which mirror the practices of the wider society, and accuracy is enhanced through grammar intervention by way of isolated focus on form (FonF) (Nassaji and Fotos, 2004; Spada and Lightbown, 2008). The *New Headway* series used in Cambridge ESOL's Certificate in English Language Teaching (CELTA) and by the British Council, and which has been described as an orthodox and practical interpretation of communicative language teaching (Thompson, 1996) and referred to as "one of the most successful and influential course books in history",¹ is used as a staple resource on the St. Augustine campus.

Problem

In 2006 this teacher/researcher noted multiple errors in SE periphrastic verb forms in cued-gapped grammar exercises and was uncertain as to how they should be dealt with. Her hesitation to address them stemmed from her understanding that errors

¹ John Soars 1951-2012 <<http://ispilledthebeans.blogspot.com/2012/08/in-memory-of-john-soars.html#!/2012/08/in-memory-of-john-soars.html>>

provided evidence of learning and were to be expected, although she was reluctant to accept them as developmental given that, theoretically, the notion of non-systematicity in interlanguage development is based upon inconsistency or instability in form-function mapping (Corder, 1973; Ellis, 1999; McLaughlin, 1990; Nemser, 1971) and here learners were having difficulty in assembling periphrastic verb phrases. This pointed to a stage in learning which preceded form-function mapping, but one which remained largely unaccounted for in SLA.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to analyse the ways in which SE periphrastic verb forms were being processed and retrieved by learners so that an explanatory theory could be developed, and, 2) based on this core variable, to design an operational theory which would reliably inform grammar intervention in the communicative classroom.

The underlying hypothesis was that the ethos of the communicative language classroom predisposes it to a greater number of non-target elements than are traditionally associated with the language classroom. Language learning is not confined to set patterns, the teacher is no longer a model, but a guide, and learners must interact with their peers, learning to pay attention to what they are saying (Spada and Lightbown, 2008). The acceptance of non-target forms as potentially non-systematic (Corder, 1973; Ellis, 1999; McLaughlin, 1990; Nemser, 1971,) and reflective of the learner's interlanguage (Selinker, 1971) or internal representation of the target seems, however, to have fostered an indifference towards them. While the legitimacy of explicit grammar instruction in the communicative classroom acknowledges that accuracy is crucial to the learning process, learner language has not been systematically examined to inform ways in which non-target forms may be intercepted (before they become permanently fixed in the learner's intermediate system) (Nemser, 1971). The absence of such a theoretical framework has, in this regard limited the quality of feedback provided to learners, serving to thwart any opportunity to critique the FonF syllabus which appears to be fashioned through the lens of the target, from simple to more complex structures.

Literature Review

The current support for explicit grammar instruction by educators may be attributed to the claim by cognitive theorists that interlanguage development is induced by an explicit rule-based system (Ellis, 2006; Skehan, 1998). Research into 25 years' worth of "natural order" studies which claim that learners proceed through similar developmental sequences, affirmed the fixed order in the acquisition of SE morphemes, but attributed this to a question of salience of form in language input (Goldschneider and DeKeyser, 2007). Studies conducted over a twenty-year period (Nassaji and Fotos, 2004) provided evidence of positive outcomes of grammar instruction, while prolonged exposure to purely communicative tasks (where meaning was primary) was found to result in inaccurate forms. If certain language features never arise in conversation and are never highlighted, non-target forms may persist indefinitely, and elucidating these features may be especially beneficial in

monolingual classes which are susceptible to cross-fertilization of errors (Spada and Lightbown, 2008).

Grammar as an object of study devoid of context is, however, repudiated today. Focus on form as it is now defined (as opposed to ‘focus on forms’ or grammar as an end in itself) may be isolated or integrated. In its isolated sense, grammar is treated discretely, existing as part of a communicative syllabus wherein learners are presented with opportunities to use the target, as in the context of the present study.

The *New Headway* series used for communicative language teaching at the St. Augustine campus comprises levels such as pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate which map onto the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR); each level has at its disposal a student book and workbook, class audio CDs, a teacher’s book (more recently a CD) containing explanations and including tests, and some levels also carry a teacher’s resource book with additional material tailored to encourage speaking practice. The units in the student book follow a themed approach and are divided into “language input” and “skills development”. Language input is divided into grammar, vocabulary, and an “Everyday English” section, and skills development is divided into listening, speaking, reading, and writing lessons.

The grammar content which accounts for one fourth to one third of each unit in the *New Headway* emphasises the verb phrase and is designed in such a way that learners themselves often have to work out the rules (Ranalli, 2002).² Structures are graded according to a synthetic or structurally-based syllabus beginning with concepts which are less complex and proceeding to more challenging ones. This contradicts Pienemann and Johnston’s claim (Nunan, 1988) that the acquisition of grammatical structures is determined not by their level of grammatical complexity but by the difficulty entailed in psycho-linguistically processing them. Peppard (2010) criticises the successive emergence of the target in the *New Headway* which Mallois (2002) refers to as the ‘Newtonian’ linearity of lesson aims which mistakenly suggests that learners encounter little, if any, difficulty in engaging with and producing target language forms. Well-established course books other than the *New Headway* series, such as *Cutting Edge*, *FCE* and *Interchange* carry the same content and follow the same procedure (Boshoff, 2008; Nitta and Gardner, 2005).

The descriptions ‘non-linear’, ‘self-organizing’ and ‘unpredictable’ used to characterize complex, chaotic and dynamic systems are typically understood in SLA to describe interlanguage development. The permutable characteristic of interlanguage is predisposed to ‘backsliding’; therefore while it may appear that a learner has command over a target language element in one instance, in another, he may very well deviate from the target (Selinker, 1972). This is described in Complexity theory (C/CT) (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and (related) Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) (De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2007) as attractor states or points which may be either favourable or unfavourable (repeller states) but which are, nonetheless, indicative of development. The difficulty in determining what learners ‘know’ may very well account for the prevailing sense of complacency towards learner language and, by extension, it may also explain why EFL practitioners have not refuted or

² Ranalli (2002) makes the interesting point that, of the twelve units in the upper-intermediate text, nine introduce a new (set of) verb phrase/s whereas only three units are devoted to noun phrases; these three are devoted to the noun phrase in the form of expressions of quantity, relative clauses and determiners.

challenged theoretical frameworks on interlanguage development described below, which are dated.

According to Corder (1973) and McLaughlin (1990) the learner proceeds through three stages. Ellis (1999) who advances a model adapted from Towell et al. speaks of five stages. Two points of convergence can be found with respect to all three models. The first is that form-function mapping is the primary focus. The second similarity is that each construct includes a stage prior to form-function mapping which is considered to be unsystematic. However, in none of the three models does this stage account for the learner having to negotiate the constituents of grammatical forms (such as periphrastic forms).

Methodology - Brief Overview

The objective of investigating errors in SE periphrastic forms through a grounded theory methodology and developing a theoretical framework to inform grammar teaching and testing was realised in phase one of the study. In phase two the studied phenomenon was subject to a “cyclical research process” (Wiśniewska, 2011). This accorded with the principles of grounded action research wherein the theoretical framework inspired the development and application of a pedagogical scheme which showed the relevance of the study’s findings.

Phase One

Copies of grammar test scripts, writing assignments and tests, and email journals were sourced from two groups of learners (groups one and two) during the academic year 2006/2007. Typed records built from the periphrastic verb forms generated in the three writing genres were used to segment the data according to grammatical classifications. Errors were subject to a system of ‘initial coding’, and then ‘focused coding’ where provisional codes were refined.

Theoretical sampling was conducted whereby data were collected from two additional groups (groups three and four) in the academic year 2007/2008 and analysed according to the (focused) codes derived from the first sampling phase. Typed records were built for these groups and data classified according to more refined or focused codes.

The data from the four groups were copied onto charts according to writing genre and grammatical classifications and remained within the researcher’s view for a period of four weeks where codes were refined. But no illuminating categories were found.

Data were built into individual student chronicles. These were descriptively written and accounted for each learner’s (n=26) responses to the elicited contexts for periphrastic verbs (grammar tests) and for the ways in which s/he manipulated the verb phrase in non-elicited contexts (written compositions and e-journals) where it appeared that: i) periphrastic forms belonged, or ii) were being attempted. This method brought to light fresh categories which had not been noted before.

The creation of individual student records according to levels (pre-intermediate, intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate) led to theoretical saturation being

achieved once records for the upper-intermediate group had been completed. Each level built on the former and major categories were well-developed but, at the stage where chronicles were built for upper-intermediate level learners, no new categories were found.

Theoretical coding was executed, where a core category was drawn out and systematically related to major categories to form a theoretical framework or explanatory theory which explained the force that drove the phenomenon under study.

Findings

Systematicity versus Non-Systematicity

Results showed that learners in the communicative classroom accommodate the constituent parts of SE periphrastic forms through orthographic and phonetic similarity and therefore confuse forms which look and sound alike. The error groupings, which are supported by examples below, are as follows: a) *have to*, *'have - en'*, *'had - en'*, *'had'*, *'would have'* and *'should have'* (examples 1-4); b) progressive formations, *'is/are -ing'* and *'was/were - ing'* and passive structures, *'is/are - en'* and *'was/were - en'* (examples 5-8); c) participial adjectives and participles (examples 9 and 10); d) *'been'* and *'being'* (example 11) and e) *'is'* and *'has'* through their shared contraction (example 12):

1. Four year after, Bob has continued³ with his studies and he had to changed the school for other where he had the opportunity to learn without use his eyes with teenagers who have similar problems with their sight.
2. I hope you is well and i want to tell you that I arrived my city yesterday because the fligth from Caracas to my city there were a trouble and the airplane had return⁴ while was flying and i had to slept in a hotel in Caracas.
3. Once again she admitted that I was much egoist to have a son, that we had would have to divide⁵ with your husband. It imagines how much she is selfish.
4. So, last friday I didn't go to Nancy's class. Because I asked you few days before at what time we have pronunciation class, you answer from 1 to 3. Also, friday morning I went to Twincity mall. When I came back, Maria told me it was at 10 to 12. But even if you told me that, I had to make sure⁶, so its my fault.
5. The next day afortunatly the police man came to rescue us while we were prepared everything to leave.

³ Use of *'has continued'*, a construction which mirrors the present perfect form, was found where either past simple *'continued'* or deontic *'had to continue'* was necessary.

⁴ A structure resembling the pluperfect, i.e. *had* together with the unmarked form, was used instead of the deontic semi-modal *have to* in the past.

⁵ The blurring of surface forms containing *'have'*, viz. *'have to'* and *'would have to'*.

⁶ The modal perfect *'modal + have -en'* was confused with the semi-modal *'have to'*.

6. During our excursion we realised that we were walked the same direction all the time.
7. He was asking (ask) to design it by the German Government.
8. The same information was carrying (carry) by Paul Reuter's pigeons in only two hours.
9. I am interesting for the poultry industries in Trinidad...
10. I was embarrassing but still love and this love was really hard and find an exit.
11. How long have you being a professional?
12. Definitely the weather is changed in whole world.

The aforementioned findings challenge theoretical constructs on interlanguage development which claim that the stage prior to form-function mapping is not system bound, referring to it as “pre-systematic”(Corder, 1973) “non-systematic” (McLaughlin, 1990) and “non-linguistic” (Ellis, 1999). William Nemser (1971) who does not propose a model, labels it as a stage of “underdifferentiation”.

Phase Two

In 2011/2012 during phase two of the research an operational theory was developed from the explanatory theory and applied in teaching and testing. Copies of grammar test scripts, writing assignments and tests, and email journals were sourced and SE periphrastic forms studied.

The Operational Theory

That learners experienced difficulty in building periphrastic verb forms even as they were expected to map these onto functions, was testimony to the sheer weight of the syllabus. Five steps set out to make target forms more salient: 1) the syllabus was prudently paced; 2) the tense review was not tested; 3) perfect forms were introduced as BrE (British English) constructs; 4) forms were introduced in simplified contexts and 5) typological explanations of grammar were used for clarification.

According to Nation and Macalister's (2010) recommendation of ‘spaced retrieval’, items in the curriculum that learners are required to master must be presented repeatedly in a variety of contexts. Such a technique favours schema automation and is referred to in Cognitive Load Theory as the ‘variability effect’ (van Merriënboer and Sweller, 2005). It is also endorsed by “cognitive-behaviorist” models which espouse the notion that declarative knowledge is transformed to procedural knowledge through repeated practice (Cook, 2001). For key elements to be presented frequently, the syllabus had to be so paced as to afford learners sufficient opportunities to engage with the material. Two measures were adopted in this regard. Firstly, the time devoted to each grammar unit was not limited, as it was before, to two or three two-hour sittings as the teacher's text recommended, but instead that unit

remained the central focus until learners signalled some level of ease in understanding some of the key features of tense, aspect and voice and, where applicable, mood.

Secondly, grammar tests were administered twice instead of thrice over the course of the ten-week semester to ensure that testing did not take place before learners had assimilated some key concepts of SE periphrastic forms as well as a fair quantity of lexicon to apply these to contexts.

Also, the tense review segment in Unit 1 of the text, which customarily introduces the grammar component, was not tested. This review incorporates multiple morpho-syntactic forms which are revisited in the individual units which follow, and the accompanying teacher resource assures that it is intended solely for the purpose of ascertaining what learners know at the start of a course. This assurance is however contradicted by its appearance in formative ‘Stop and Check 1’ and summative tests ‘Progress Test 1’ designed for the first quarter and first half of the course respectively, where it is evaluated in complex contexts wherein knowledge of innumerable forms are evaluated.

The omission of the tense review in a system of less frequent testing may be considered consistent with the ‘goal-free effect’ (van Merriënboer and Sweller, 2005) This is typically used in conjunction with computational problems where the demands made of learners to provide answers to complex problems are suspended in favour of their achieving sub-goals. In this way, learner attention is focussed on the operational features of the problem and not on finding a solution. The decision to introduce the present perfect and pluperfect as BrE constructs and to sensitize learners to the use of the past simple to achieve perfect marking in SE varieties such as American English (Palmer, 1987) and Trinidad Standard English (Youssef, 1990) also complied with the goal-free effect since learners did not have to exert mental effort to manipulate the perfect although they were in a better position to identify it. At the same time, they were ‘free’ to (continue to) use the past simple for perfect marking which corresponded with the standard variety used in the linguistic context where the study took place. Their working memory was consequently partially unburdened of two forms (present perfect and pluperfect) containing ‘have’ (a surface form) which, because of its resemblance to other elements in SE, was found to have motivated multiple errors.

Capsulized presentations featuring certain groupings of morpho-syntactic forms⁷ were introduced before the ready-made units in the text were tackled. These were sequenced according to the grammar resource but designed independently of it. Unlike textual presentations, these were: 1) assumption-free 2) framed by simple lexicon and 3) not dependent on learners to build input.

Based on her own contribution to the field of SLA the teacher/researcher was in a position to respond when orthographic and phonetic associations were made between periphrastic forms. She provided feedback as needed and frequently asked learners to deconstruct contracted forms and to discriminate between forms which were typically confused. Typological explanations were used specifically with respect to universal categories of the perfect and the modal progressive form which disambiguates deontic meaning—conveyed by the simple form—from epistemic or dynamic meaning.

⁷ These were the passive voice, perfect aspect, future forms and modal auxiliary verbs.

Findings

Unlike any of the former groups, the percentage of correct responses for each of the 11 forms elicited in group five (n=9) was above 50%. Group five also achieved the highest number of correct responses with respect to the following elicited forms: future forms (going to, will and the present progressive forms), modal auxiliary verbs, the past simple and the present perfect. Of the four groups where the pluperfect was elicited in grammar tests, group five showed the highest percentage of correct forms.

Responses retrieved from the grammar tests administered to group five showed that, overall, more learning had taken place. In the case of A2 learners, for instance, evidence of associations among surface forms with 'have' was confined to grammar tests, as opposed to previous groups where A2 learners had made these associations across all assessment types.

Four errors which surfaced in written compositions of group five learners were considered to be lapses. The first, exemplified below, was regarded as a lapse since the learner otherwise manipulated the two forms, 'been' and 'being', expertly in grammar and non-grammar forums.

13. Yesterday, I met with a group of students. They study in a course that I have beeing teach during this semester.

Example 13 may be described as exceptional in light of the ways in which an A2 upper-intermediate learner in the pre-operational phase had consistently used 'had being' rather than 'had been' together with the unmarked verb or past participle. This formation was found where the SE periphrastic verb forms, the past progressive and the past simple active and passive, were being elicited.

Isolated 'being' in the post-operational phase (example 13) is further disassociated from a random distribution because it may also be contrasted with the way in which an intermediate learner employed 'been' and 'being' in the pre-operational phase. He did not reserve the two elements for mutually exclusive environments but employed them synonymously in grammar tests. In examples 14 and 15 where this is evident, the adverbials 'next holiday' and 'last holiday' are noted not to have influenced his choice of tense:

14. How long has he being in Italy next holiday.

15. How long have they been in the US last holiday.

The second lapse, noted once in a written composition of a group five learner, was an association between the pluperfect, 'had -en', and the semi-modal, 'had to'. In example 16 where this is shown, 'had taken' was used where 'had to take' was needed:

16. Before we had started our adventure, we had to prepair many things like hotel restaurants, airports, bus stations and the most important routes we had taken also call our family in the final destinations for emergence.

Use of the past participle rather than the present participle by one learner in grammar, and by another in a written composition exemplified the third example of an isolated error, or lapse, which was made once each (examples 17 and 18 respectively):

17. Since then she had been worked for him.
18. ..but even though experts have been searched (search) for this one for days...

Examples 17 and 18 can be contrasted with other such errors which appeared either in more than one writing forum, or occurred repetitiously in the pre-operational phase of the study. A pre-intermediate learner had, for instance, used the past simple passive form ‘was/were – en’ instead of the past progressive form ‘was/were –ing’ in a written composition and also in her e-journal entries, whereas a group two learner had used the ‘was-ing’ form consistently in a grammar exercise which evaluated knowledge of the passive voice.

The fourth lapse noted among the errors gathered from group five written compositions showed confusion between use of –ed and –ing as adjectival, i.e. ‘boring’, where ‘bored’ was due:

19. The morning after she was boring.

This case was exceptional also particularly when compared with the extent to which learners in previous groups confused the two forms, indiscriminately distributing ‘-ed’ and ‘-ing’ endings as they confused adjectivals with present and past participles.

Conclusion

The systematic error groupings discovered here provide ELT practitioners with a toolkit, in practical terms, or a sound theoretical base, the use of which will aid 1) in intercepting non-target forms before they become permanently fixed in the learner’s intermediate system 2) in grouping verb phrases for the purposes of disentangling them, rather than relying exclusively on the sequence in any conventional grammar syllabus, synthetic or otherwise, and 3) in helping to build a system of organized feedback which does not yet exist for grammatical forms, and which is particularly useful for the adult learner who is critical of his progress and motivated to learn in light of the investment he makes in English for higher education or business opportunities (Smith and Strong, 2009).

“Pre-form-function mapping” puts EFL at the UWI St. Augustine campus in an exemplary position in its ability to produce superior results when compared to conventional norms in ELT and in establishing new best practices in the field. The theoretical framework is available for incorporation into the postgraduate TESOL Diploma offered by the St. Augustine campus in the following courses: 1) LING 1103 Introduction to Methodology, Lesson Planning and Classroom Management and 2) LING 1104 Practical and Innovative Approaches to TEFL (Professional Development Course in TESOL).

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