

ABSTRACT

The Preamble to Form-Function Mapping: the Development of a Theoretical Construct to Respond to Elemental Stages in the Language-Learner's Processing of SE Periphrastic Forms

Amina Ibrahim-Ali

This study set out to explicate through a grounded-theory approach the ways in which Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A1 and A2 learners (n = 26) were negotiating the constituent parts of written SE periphrastic verb forms in formal and informal modes of written assessment. Findings showed that learners were inclined to apply auxiliary elements and participles in cued-gapped grammar tasks in ways wherein no conceivable pattern could be ascertained and overall, to reconcile verb forms through orthographic and phonetic similarity; or as lexical items, which was evident in their distribution of unmarked verbs. The explanatory theory concluded that, owing to the demands of learning which were too great for the limited capacity of short-term or working memory, learners were cognitively burdened—on the one hand, SE periphrastic verb forms were intrinsically difficult to learn; on the other, methods of teaching and testing were ill-equipped to smooth the learning process.

The operational theory consequently set out to reduce: 1) intrinsic cognitive load and 2) extraneous cognitive load.¹ A group of learners (n = 9) who were enrolled in a ten-week long intermediate course in general English from January to March 2012 at the Centre for Language Learning at the UWI St. Augustine campus benefitted from modifications to the instructional design.

An examination of formal and informal modes of written assessment showed that the apparent random application of forms in cued-gapped exercises was confined to two grammar exercises where task demands were still too great, and that approximations, associations based on surface structure and sound, and use of the unmarked verb were fewer and not distributed in as many environments. While errors are not at all undesirable in communicative language teaching (CLT) which understands them to be a natural part of learner cognitive development, the operational theory undoubtedly enhanced the learning process, showing the most recent group of learners to have assimilated far more whole SE periphrastic verb

¹de Jong, "Cognitive Load Theory"; Sweller, van Merriënboer, and Paas, "Cognitive Architecture"; van Merriënboer and Sweller, "Cognitive Load Theory"; the former concerns the difficulty of the material to be learnt and the latter is concerned with the cognitive burden resulting from weak instructional methods.

forms than the learners before them, and to be far less confused in manipulating them.

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