Educational Bilingualism
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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPING GRAMMAR COMPETENCE IN BILINGUALS

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Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the communication oriented approach underlies today’s system of language teaching with the premium basically placed on the learner’s communicative competence as the ultimate goal of the whole process of study. This, in turn, presupposes the acquisition of skills crucial to all foreign language communication practices, namely informational, socio-cultural, purely linguistic and others. Properly speaking, they all stem from and can be narrowed down to one basic notion of cognition as the defining characteristic of the learner’s competencies across a broad range of communicative activities. For this reason, the issues of knowledge acquisition, processing and activation have been brought to the fore ever since Chomsky (1965) formulated the concept of linguistic competence and Langacker (1986) developed the theory of usage-based language acquisition. With certain advances in cognitive science in the late 20th century, foreign language teaching methodology does now go by the principle ‘effective communication is possible when a person knows what, how and where to say.’ Thus, it would be quite safe to assume that modern EFL/ESL teaching heavily relies upon the integration of communicative and cognitive approaches, or else cognitive-communicative approach adopted in language syllabi designed in the vein of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Quite interestingly, Millrood and Maksimova (2014) introduced a cognitive model of developing grammar competence in EFL/ESL learners, which may help teachers arrive at a raised awareness of grammar teaching
through grammatical representations as well as appropriate skills in the communication classroom.

When it comes to language skills, which are understood to lay the basis for further communication, they are taught respectively according to the standards of the cognitive-communicative paradigm: students have to interact in a foreign language, or else create their foreign language discourse through context, or rather text-based (usage-based) grammar and vocabulary learning. Admittedly, the principle of continuity between cognition and communication does not seem to apply to all EFL/ESL teaching practices here. In particular, the explanatory aspect of grammar competence development in bilinguals appears out of account of the cognitive-communicative approach. A case study of English tenses instruction across explanation and interpretation techniques will demonstrate how deeply traditionalism and old-fashioned structuralism are still embedded in classroom practices today and how it is possible to change and upgrade this system.

**English tenses instruction: crisis of traditionalism**

First and foremost, it should be noted that what constitutes the traditional vision of English tenses we are accustomed to is all about structures and their pragmatic meanings. Formulae, such as ‘The present perfect is built up by means of the auxiliary *have* and the participle of the notional verb’ or ‘The present perfect is used with adverbs *already, just,* etc.’, represent the structure-based approach with elements of prescriptive functionalism (i.e. dictating the rules of usage). These precepts are based on understanding language forms as self-contained structural elements which build up and function independently or by some unknown (at least, not specified) force so as to acquire or change meanings. Loosely speaking, such a conception of grammar is deeply rooted in the “good old” time-tested Latinistic model of tenses, which presumably was first introduced by Donatus and Priscian and adopted in William Lily’s *Rudimenta Grammatices* (1534). It is in this very work that the formal-semantic criteria of defining English tenses are thought to have originated (Dons 2004).

Little has changed since then, with Jesperson’s (1933) axes of English tenses (pre-past – past – pre-present – present – pre-future – future – post-future), Reichenbach’s (1956) logical criteria of analysis with points of event, speech and reference still dominating the system of explanatory methods widespread in English tenses instruction. The present perfect is thereby interpreted as an analytical verb form referring to an action
completed in the past but connected to the present (constituting the proverbial “pre-present” and closely related to the Latinistic pluperfect model). Given a number of other uses of this grammar phenomenon suggested by different authors, the interpretation does not seem to vary much.

The main problem which underlies the generally accepted technique of English tenses explication results from the following factors:

1. Linguists and teachers rely on two different and conflicting approaches to language. In a classroom where language is taught through competence-based activities (thus, language is recognized as experience acquired in social and communicative activities), standards of structuralism prevail in grammar instruction (structures are formed, verbs ‘lose’ their meanings).

2. Students resort to different criteria of explicability underlying a grammar rule or guideline they have to learn. For example, the present perfect is explained logically (action which is connected to the present through its result), semantically (completed action, continuing into a present moment), pragmatically, or functionally (we use the present perfect to announce news, etc.), structurally (the present perfect is formed by the verb have and the past participle of the main verb) all in one.

3. Learners face contradictory terms which do not fully cover – if help understand – any meaning behind the grammar phenomenon (e.g. why does the present perfect express actions completed in the past?).

4. In real-life communication (i.e. discourse), learners and teachers encounter examples of use which are practically impossible to explain and sometimes even understand if one applies traditional norms (e.g. You look bad. Did you sleep well?/We have had such problems in the past).

Cognitive-communicative paradigm and grammar explanation: tenets and methods of analysis

It is important that the methods and theoretical tenets of the propounded approach should be adequately formulated and consistently applied in research on the English perfect tense as a language phenomenon with a view to adapting and accommodating the relevant findings to the interpretation of this tense as an object of teaching and learning in the EFL/ESL classroom.
In the first place, the understanding of any grammar or lexical unit implies formulating the notion of language itself as the basis for further analysis. The cognitive-communicative paradigm does not treat language as a system of signs, the exchange of which effects communication. Instead, it looks at language as a person’s ability to create signs in their mind by experiencing such a state of neural activity that makes it possible to communicate, or produce and interpret speech (cf. works by Arkhipov (2012), Cowley (2012), Pesina (2014), Kravchenko (2016) and others). Thus, all grammar phenomena are nothing short of a person’s language competence as knowledge (the product of their cognitive activity) one has to be sure that they can make themselves clear and be adequately understood in a given situation of communication. This knowledge is stored in memory systemically and prototypically, i.e. in the form of best images or language-as-a-system meanings of words and their formal modifications and combinability. The theories of cognitive prototype (Wittgenstein 1953; Rosch 1973; Strauss 1979) and lexical prototype (Arkhipov 1998) backed by findings of neurophysiologists and psychologists (Bekhtereva 1978; Chernigovskaya and Deglin 1986; Younger and Gottlieb 1988; Solso et al. 2005; etc.) provided a plausible bio-cognitive explanation of how a human’s mind operates on language signs: the meaning of a word is a certain state of the speaker’s/interpreter’s mental activity in which the (prototypical) image of a certain form comes to be associated with the (prototypical) image of its content, whereas the meaning of any grammar construction with this word or its grammatical form is the product of one’s knowledge of how and what with this word can potentially combine to express more complex ideas.

By these standards, rules and numerous prescriptions are not the cognitive basis for creating grammar in speech unlike what tradition has been postulating. Instead, it is the knowledge of the prototypical semantic contents of grammar forms that helps language users create more or less typical and expected discourse meanings. At the explanatory stage of the EFL/ESL grammar competence development, all grammar forms (verb aspect/tense forms, in particular) should thereby be viewed as combinations of verbs, one of which comes to be understood to such a point of abstraction (rather than being auxiliary) that it can be used together with another verb to express certain ideas of orientation in time and space. A vivid example of such a tense form is the so-called present perfect.
Cognitive analysis of Present Perfect

A cognitive analysis of the semantic structure of the verb *have* will help find answers to the questions: why is the construction *have + past participle* so widely used in English to describe time and space relations?; what exactly does it help describe what kind of space and time we perceive? The main point is that the semantic structure should be viewed cognitively, purely as a result of one’s cognitive (cognitive-languaging) activity, unlike in the traditional approach which takes semantics for granted (existing in the mind of a speaker a-priori).

At the first stage of the analysis, we are supposed to identify and define the central, prototypical meaning associated in the native speaker’s mind with this verb. The results of the analysis will help trace the process of semantic transfer this verb undergoes when combined with the past participle, which will allow us to describe the discourse meaning of this grammatical combination and propose a new, language-reality explanation to be used in the EFL/ESL grammar instruction.

As is known, the first, or most common, and easily recognizable discourse meaning of the verb is to possess, e.g. *have a good character*. In many other situations, the spectrum of our possession expands as far as we can feel and act: we can possess something or somebody as an owner (e.g. *have a dog*), as an eater (e.g. *have breakfast*), as a host (e.g. *I’m having guests over for dinner today*), as a user of an object associated with an action (e.g. *have a cigarette = to smoke; have a bath = to bathe*), as an experiencer (e.g. *have fun; have a good time*), etc. In a figurative way, the same goes for objects or events (e.g. *The book has five chapters – it possesses chapters within the spectrum of its size and length; The meeting didn’t have much animation – it didn’t possess the characteristic of animation in the spectrum of its activities*). Sometimes we can fall into the sphere of possession of other objects (e.g. *The film had me in tears – I was in tears when I watched the film*). On balance, the verb *have* refers to possession within the sphere of one’s capacity to act, to feel, to be of some quality, etc.

Such a meaning of possession begins to be understood in the abstract when the verb is combined with other verbs. In the sphere of our capacity we can possess a potential action (to do), the idea of such, to be exact. In other words, we bear in mind the idea of doing something in the future, because we are apparently obliged to do this, i.e. we have to do something (e.g. *I have to go*). This action is sometimes transferred onto other people or objects, whom we ‘possess in our sphere’: we give them orders, or we handle them, or they just appear around us (we have them) in such a way
that they do something or are already doing something in our sphere of activity or feelings (e.g. He had the audience laughing; He always has the stereo playing; I’ll have him show you the room).

Another typical pattern with the verb have is its combination with the past participle of another verb (e.g. have stopped working). If we undertake an attempt to analyse the semantics of this frequently used word-form combination, we will see that have stopped working = “possess within one’s sphere (of capacity to work) a completed action of stopping” = “possess within the sphere of working what is left after stopping” = “possess the absence of working” = be not working. It appears that this combination of forms helps the native speaker express the meaning of state (and with reason, due to the fact that have refers to the state of possessing something), which can be illustrated by many other examples:

- be through with something = have finished doing something;
- be out (about a fire) = have stopped burning;
- be out of practice = have not done something for a long time.

The list can be followed by other equations of the same type:
- be friends = have made friends;
- be off = have left;
- know = have learnt;
- have = have got.

In the English language, thus, it is common to use the verbs have and be to point out to the situation when somebody or something experiences some state of existence with other objects or events “placed” around them (the verb be, e.g.: he is at work/he is working) or within the sphere of their possession (the verb have, e.g.: he has a job/he has worked here all his life). In this respect, it would be interesting to mention the tendency of parallel use of these two verbs in some situations to refer to the same notion, e.g.:

- Are you finished? = Have you finished?
- He is gone. = He has gone.
- He is come (old-fashioned). = He has come.

Benveniste (1974) devoted a whole chapter of his Problèmes de linguistique générale to the analysis of the verbs have and be across language communities. His conclusion was that all languages express the notion of having by the notion of being (near/at sb), and the languages in
which *have* is more common (English and German) developed it from the pattern *mihi est* (there is sth at me).

Therefore, the so-called present perfect, or the combination of the present-tense form of *have* with the past participle (e.g. *I have done*) does not refer to an action which took place in the past and is connected to the present. Instead, it describes the present state of things when there is a completed action (there is something done or there is a ‘fulfilled existence’ of something): it can be now seen, felt, observed, thus, it is part of one’s relevant experience.

**Results and findings to be applied in EFL/ESL teaching practice**

Guided by this definition, the interpretation of this word-form combination should be based on the answer to one simple question: what is there now within the sphere of the subject? For example, the following phrases, which present obvious and challenging (according to traditional grammars) situations of use of the present perfect, can be understood in one simple way:

- *I have got a letter* [= *I have a letter now*].
- *I have discovered this truth* [= *I know this truth now*].
- *I have had a hard day* [= *I now have a hard day ‘behind me’*].
- *It has been a pleasure to meet you* [= *It is/I have now a fulfilled pleasurable meeting of you*].
- *Where have you been now?* [= *Visits to what places do you have now?*].
- *I have worked in Madrid for five years* [= *I have 5-year work experience in Madrid*].
- *It has been the capital for 5 centuries* [= *there is now 500-year existence of it as the capital*].
- *We have had problems in the past* [= *We know/have an idea of problems from our past*].

It is recommended that each of the suggested interpretation versions be supplied with comments on its situational meaning, e.g. asking *Where have you been?*, one literally implies ‘visits to what places stand behind your appearance here and now’, i.e. these visits are still relevant and important because the speaker sees his/her friend here and now and says *Where have you been?*, meaning ‘I don’t know anything about your absence.’
As the next step of explanation and analysis, it is important to compare and contrast the use of the present perfect and past simple, which presents most difficulties to English grammar learners. The following examples illustrate situations which cannot be easily interpreted by traditional textbooks, but are well explained within the cognitive communicative approach:

(1) (A BBC commentator after a football match of the British team):

Look at the footballers. They know they did enough for the game. They know they haven’t won it.
The game is not part of the footballer’s past experience, it happened in the past, therefore, the efforts of the footballers took place there and then (they did), while the result of the game (a win or loss) is relevant now and is what they (and the commentator) have (they haven’t won it).

(2) (Conversational exchange) “What is wrong with your bag?” “I dropped it into a puddle.”
The action of dropping is not relevant, it is not what the speaker has here and now (the bag in a puddle), but what accidentally happened to the speaker’s bag back then.

(3) (A man seeing a woman fall over): You haven’t broken anything? Did it hurt?

It is clear that the man is interested in the present condition of the woman, i.e. if she has any leg or arm broken (haven’t you broken), besides, he also wants to know the details of the past action which took place a moment ago (did it hurt).

Another mention should be made of bilingual methods of explication which are useful to show the parallels between the mother tongue and target language. Besides, the interpretation may rely on those words and grammar forms in the learner’s native language which describe the target grammar item most effectively and help avoid inter- and cross-language interference (cf. У меня сейчас сломана рука, у меня есть побывавшая 2 года жизнь – I have broken/I have lived instead of I broke/I live).

Conclusion and discussion of results

In conclusion, the presented approach enables us to view the grammar phenomenon of the present perfect in the EFL/ESL learning and teaching as a word-form combination where the verb have is used to refer to the same notion of possession, but in a very abstract way. The description of
the meaning of the whole construction can be formulated as follows: the present perfect denotes the present state of existence in which there is a completed action as part of the subject’s relevant experience (it is now seen, felt, observed). Given the novelty of the suggested formula compared to the one accepted in traditional EFL/ESL grammar instruction, there should be a number of guidelines for teachers to follow in the classroom:

- start with focusing the learners’ attention on the semantics of the verb have (as shown above);
- use the language of rephrasing (e.g. somebody has something, there is something, something exists) to describe how a completed action can be present in the sphere of the subject (e.g. have finished = be over);
- outline the most typical situations when this word-form combination helps the speaker describe the relevant experience: we know (e.g. I have read), we feel (e.g. I have had a hard day), we act (e.g. At this stage, teenagers have already developed logical thinking skills) in a different, respective way;
- contrast the uses of the present and the past, using the vivid example of I have got a letter now and I got a letter then to show that the present perfect shows the here-and-now present, while the past simple refers to the there-and-then past;
- give examples of a contrasted use of these two forms commonly confused by bilingual learners with the help of the respective interpretation techniques;
- avoid departure from the chosen course and using explanations such as ‘action which left results in the present,’ because this formula shifts the accent from the present state of things on the idea of completion of a past action, therefore it may be misleading (cf. We remember and honor these soldiers now because they died for us).

References


