A COGNITIVE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING PRESENT PERFECT TO ESL LEARNERS

O.G. Polyakov*, A.S. Druzhinin
Derzhavin Tambov State University, Tambov
Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Moscow
*e-mail: olegpo@rambler.ru

Abstract
In the era of cognitive communicative paradigm postulated in competence-oriented EFL standards, methods of structural linguistics still take prominent place today. They are widely manifested in EFL grammar instruction, particularly at the explanatory stage as EFL learners are offered purely formalistic interpretation of grammatical phenomena. For example, such formulae as “the present perfect tense is formed by the auxiliary verb have” provide an understanding of language far from cognitive or communicative, which gives the learner a vague idea as to why, how and what they use to describe time-space relations. The article makes a case for new methods of analyzing present perfect, namely those of cognitive semantics, which could be easily applied in the EFL classroom to explain the true language reality and cognitive base behind English grammar at large.

Keywords: cognitive semantics, communicative approach, EFL classroom, grammar teaching, method, present perfect

1. Introduction
Unlike school students, graduates learning ESL oftentimes need explanation when it comes to grammar. Coursebooks for university students traditionally offer sets of grammar rules accompanied by examples and exercises to foster the knowledge acquired, which does not necessarily lead to a correct understanding and, therefore, use of, say, the appropriate tense form. A cognitive approach to the teaching of grammar to ESL learners seems to be a feasible solution to the above problem.

As regards teaching grammar at university level, cognition as the characteristic underlying learner communicative competence has been scrutinized by researchers into applied linguistics and language teaching (Holme 2009; Littlemore 2009; Polyakov 2012; Druzhinin 2017; etc.).

Millrood and Maksimova (2014) propose a cognitive model of ESL learner grammar competence, which may lead teachers to a better understanding of teaching grammar through grammatical representations and appropriate skills in the language communication classroom.

Grammar is often seen by students and teachers the most boring aspect of language learning and instruction, even within a communicative approach. However, if we take a look at it from a cognitive angle, it appears to be, as Langacker (2013:3) puts it, ‘quite engaging when properly understood,’ going on to claim that ‘grammar is meaningful’ (ibid). Being aware of what makes communication in a
foreign language effective, we still hesitate to say what hinders us from using English grammar like native speakers at large and from knowing what, how and where to use appropriate tense forms. Let us look with a critical eye at traditionalism in teaching grammar in the English language classroom and then go on to discuss the possibility to integrate a communicative approach with a cognitive one.

2. Traditionalism vs. cognitivism

In the traditional treatment of tenses in the ESL classroom, this is all about structures and their contextual meanings. Course books offer rules that explain how tense forms are built up, e.g. *Present perfect is formed with the help of the auxiliary have / has and the past participle of the main verb or Present perfect is often used with these adverbs: already, just and so on.*

Knowing the prototypical semantic contents of grammar forms is likely to help us as language users create expectedly typical discourse meanings (Druzhinin 2017). That is why it seems feasible to view grammar forms, especially tense forms, as phrases, or combinations of verbs, at the phase of explanation. One of these verbs comes to be understood to a certain point of abstraction that it can be used together with the other one to express the idea of orientation in space and time. A good example of this is present perfect.

3. Understanding and explaining present perfect: cognitive semantics plus communication

Why do native speakers so frequently make use of *have + past participle* combination to describe space and time relations? To answer this question, let us analyse the semantic structure of the first element, i.e. the verb *have*, from a cognitive standpoint.

Methods of prototype semantics widely used in cognitive linguistics to explore and formulate the semantic core, invariant meaning of words and word-forms seem to shed light on the language and discourse essence of the grammar phenomenon. The results of the analysis of the verb *have* suggest that there is a distinct invariant seme to possess within one’s sphere of capacity (to act, feel or be), which comes to be re-understood in a most abstract way to describe different forms of orientation in space (e.g. *have to go, have sb in tears, have sb type letters*). The word-form combination *have done* is another manifestation of how time-space continuum is perceived by a language user. In particular, it refers to such a situation in which there is an action (like in *I am doing*), but a completed one, i.e. this action is felt, observed and still perceived through its completion (*There has been an accident = there is / we have now an accident ‘in its final / finished stage’*). From the communicative point of view, the speaker describes the current state of things which can be here-and-now observed (e.g. by saying *there has been an accident* the speaker means ‘there are crashed cars or injured people here and now’; by saying *Where have you been?* the speaker implies that he / she here and now has no information about your absence).

It is important to note in this respect that the suggested interpretation of *have* collocations should be adapted to certain a degree to a learner’s cognitive accessibility, which implies that they may be formulated in their mother tongue.
Such a bilingual method could become a prospective stand-by in the explanation of English tenses from the viewpoint of cognitive semantics.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the approach proposed allows viewing the phenomenon of present perfect in the ESL grammar learning and teaching as a combination of the verb *have*, which is used to refer to its systemic meaning, i.e. *possess*, in rather an abstract way, though. The meaning of the phrase as a whole can be described in the following way: it indicates the current state of being, in which there is an accomplished action as part of the subject’s here-and-now experience, so it is now felt, seen, etc.

References

помощи вспомогательного глагола *have*, обеспечивают понимание языковых средств, весьма далекое от познавательного или коммуникативного. Таким образом, обучаемые получают смутное представление о том, почему, как и что они используют для характеристики пространственно-временных отношений. В статье рассматриваются новые методы анализа глагольной формы *present perfect*, а именно методы когнитивной семантики, которые могут быть легко применены на занятиях по английскому языку как иностранному для объяснения подлинной языковой реальности и когнитивной основы грамматики английского языка в целом.

**Ключевые слова:** когнитивная семантика, коммуникативный подход, обучение английскому языку как иностранному, обучение грамматике, метод, глагольная форма *present perfect*