

**Promoting Language Awareness and Avoiding
Misconceptions in Teaching
Grammar to EFL Students with Special Reference to the
Past Perfect**

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Abstract

The role of grammar instruction in EFL has been a subject of debate and has undergone many changes over the years .

Language awareness, which is defined as "the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and function of language"(Carter , 2003: 64) can be of great help in this regard.

In order to enable learners to analyze and internalize language rules, EFL teachers may devise a number of do-it-yourself strategies whose purpose is to raise learners awareness of important features and help them construct their own grammar from personal exploration tasks .

For teaching the past perfect in English, a number of strategies might be devised by EFL teachers to raise learners awareness of the real and appropriate uses of this form and the differences that distinguish it from the other past tense forms .

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تعزيز الوعي اللغوي وتجنب المفاهيم الخاطئة في تدريس النحو والماضي التام لدارسي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية

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ملخص

ان تدريس قواعد اللغة الانجليزية للطلبة الذين يدرسون اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية كان ولا يزال موضع جدل بين المختصين وتعددت وتباينت حوله الآراء في السنوات الاخيرة.

وبالنسبة لمفهوم "الوعي المعرفي اللغوي" والذي عرفه كارتر (2003:64) بأنه: تطوير ادراك الدارسين وحسهم الداخلي للصيغ والوظائف اللغوية. فيمكن ان يكون ذا اهمية كبيرة في هذا المجال.

ومن اجل تمكين الطلبة من تحليل وفهم قواعد اللغة الانجليزية فان معلمي هذه اللغة كلغة اجنبية يمكن ان يستنبطوا ويطوروا مجموعة من استراتيجيات الأداء الطلابي الذاتي التي تهدف الى تعزيز ادراك الطلبة للخصائص اللغوية الهامة والتي تساعد في صياغة قواعد خاصة بهم من خلال ادوار الاستكشاف الذاتي.

ومن اجل تدريس صيغة الماضي التام في اللغة الانجليزية فيمكن لمعلمي هذه اللغة كلغة اجنبية ان يستنبطوا ويطوروا مجموعة من الاستراتيجيات لتعزيز الادراك اللغوي للطلبة بخصوص الاستخدام الفعلي والمقبول لهذه الصيغة وبخصوص الاختلافات التي تميز هذه الصيغة عن غيرها من صيغ الماضي في اللغة الانجليزية.

Introduction

Much has been written about the controversial subject of grammar instruction in EFL

Traditional grammar instruction was criticized for the long teacher explanation, drills and boring exercises which led to the rise of new teaching methods with meaningful communicative environments in the 1970s .

Based on Chomsky theories , "Nativists" including Krashen (1981), Prabhu (1987) and others argued against explicit grammatical instruction in favor of the naturalistic "discovery " of the target language's rule system. Bourke (2008) argues that if learners are to analyze and internalize language rules and systems, they need what might raise their awareness of the various linguistic elements and help them to build their own grammar. This means that the strategies EFL teachers devise to enhance such awareness are essential. However, and according to Templeton (2009), the process by which students are helped to understand and internalize the system requires careful and consistent development. Every opportunity needs to be taken in order to compare and contrast aspects of the second language with patterns familiar to the students in their mother tongue.

Templeton (2009) adds that besides highlighting the language functions, vocabulary and language tasks, such practice would develop language awareness by showing how the language system is made up of many parts, how the same function can be expressed in several different ways and how the function learned in one context can be transferred and re-used in other contexts.

Language Awareness

Awareness implies knowledge of the truth. Language awareness implies that we make learners aware of facts about language. In other words, it is an attempt to raise learners knowledge of features of the target language. According to Carter (2003:64), language awareness is "the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language "

In this sense, it refers to any technique or combination of techniques that enable learners to understand how a piece of language works.

Some other expressions that are similar to language awareness include "consciousness-raising" (Schmidt, 1990; Fotos, 1993), "grammar interpretations tasks" and "grammar discovery approach" (Ellis, 1995). These involve providing learners with data to illustrate a particular grammatical feature and getting them to analyze it so as to arrive at an understanding of how the feature works. However, language awareness differs in that it is wider in scope, including not only grammatical awareness but also lexical, phonological and discourse awareness.

Research conducted in this area indicates that learners internalize those grammar features that they are ready to learn, passing through transitional stages in this regard (Ellis, 1998). This means that learning the rules is an intuitive way that enables learners to be accessed easily and quickly for purposes of communication.

Rationale for Language Awareness or Grammar-discovery Approaches

If teachers intend to get students to use a grammatical structure accurately, meaningfully and appropriately, then they need to provide them with the opportunity to use it in meaningful and engaging activities.

Thus, the idea behind language awareness, as Bourke (2008:16) puts it, is that

"learners themselves construct their own grammar from their own language experience, and thereby either consciously or subconsciously restructure their emerging interlanguage".

He adds that learners find themselves actively involved in discovering features of the language. They are not given the rules, but rather work inductively from structured input to arrive at their own understandings. Thus, it is a process-oriented approach, which includes steps of discovery, investigation and understanding, but contrasts with the traditional product-oriented approach in which one is told the rules and has to drill and memorize them. Within the same context, Freeman (cited in Perez-Llantada, 2007) argues that rules can be useful, but they are form-based and are usually stated in inflexible ways; and that is not how language works. Language exists for the expression and interpretation of meaning. Moreover, if one

understands why speakers make the choices they do, he/ she will have some access to the way they think. In short, language learning entails understanding what the sentence really means in that language.

Language Awareness and Traditional Methods of Teaching

Language awareness approach tries to guide learners towards discovering and understanding truths about language. Hence, it is likely to be more motivating than the traditional direct approaches for teaching. In fact, learners find it more interesting to discover things for themselves than to be told such facts (Nunan,1998; Schmidt,1990; Bourke, 2008)

Since language awareness implies conscious reflection on the language, it differs from traditional grammar instruction. The role played by the rules is one major distinction. In language awareness approach, rules are not

"a body of externally and objectively defined knowledge to be studied" (Borg ,1996:119), but rather as post-fact descriptions of linguistic patterns noticed .

According to Svalberg (2001: 201) ,

"language awareness approaches may prove to be a more effective way to help learners progress in a language as they encourage the discovery of patterns."

In his paper on language awareness, Bourke (2008:14) summarized differences between language awareness and traditional grammar teaching as follows:

-Language awareness is not a body of established facts about grammar, but the sum of enabling strategies one uses to get a handle on the language system. It employs cognitive strategies such as noticing, hypothesis testing, problem-solving and restructuring .

-Language awareness comes out of an initial focus on meaning .The objective is to investigate which forms are available to realize certain meanings, notions and functions.

- The aim of language awareness is to develop in the learner an awareness of and sensitivity to form and meaning, and not just to learn

a long list of grammatical items.

-Language awareness is not the same thing as "practice"; it is about input processing, noticing certain patterns or relationships and discovery rules.

- Language awareness is multi-faceted. It goes beyond the raising of grammatical consciousness to include all linguistic components: vocabulary, morphology, phonology and discourse.

- Language awareness is data-driven. Learners are not told the rule, but are given a set of data from which they infer the rule or generalization in their own way. By noticing the gap between their production and the correct target form, they may restructure their conclusion.

Grammar Instruction within Language Awareness Approach

Despite the reaction against direct grammar instruction, many researchers still strongly advocate for the role of conscious learning and argue that syntax can and should be taught. However, they recognize that interventions by means of traditional exercises such as drilling are much less effective than the communicative techniques that could be used

(Bourke, 2008).

An alternative way to direct grammar instruction is to use a grammar-discovery approach, which involves providing learners with data to illustrate a particular grammatical feature and getting them to analyze it so as to arrive at an understanding of how the feature functions (Ellis, 1998). This requires them to become active-thinkers in order to discover for themselves how the grammar of the language they are studying works.

In this way, language awareness approach helps to foster the curiosity and the skills needed to work on language autonomously. It helps learners become aware of the cognitive processes of native speakers, which may enhance their learning efficiency.

More than that, tasks in this regard help learners to develop the analytical skills they need to dissect language for themselves (ibid) .

Thus, teachers might promote language awareness in their students through the implementation of some techniques and activities.

In fact, teachers can use dozens of effective activities to facilitate language awareness in the classroom. According to Bourke (2008), these will enable the teacher to "problematize" instruction and allow learners to actively engage in the learning process. Estaire and Zanon (1994:15) see that the purpose of these activities is to provide students with the necessary linguistic tools to carry out a communication task, which link language awareness to task-based learning. These analysis or practice activities might involve analyzing texts and sets of examples in order to notice specific language points.

Students here might be asked to find and classify all the phrases referring to time in a given text, notice the use and meaning categories of some words or parts of words, look up a point of grammar in a reference book and report back, notice the target structure and the context in which it occurs, check that the rule holds against further data, and use the structure in a short production task (Willis, 1996).

Some of the techniques to be used in this context include problem-solving, error detection and correction, Cloze procedure, paraphrasing, sentence combining, and grammaring (i.e. the ability to access and use grammatical devices to make meaning).

In presenting the article system, for example, the difference between the use of 'a' versus 'an' might be pointed out as follows:

Problem: Why are some nouns preceded by 'a' and some others by 'an'?

Instructions: Read the text below and underline all nouns preceded by 'a' or 'an'. Such technique allows the learner to notice syntactic patterning and make judgments about the rule.

Within grammaring tasks, learners are to make decisions as to which grammatical devices are most appropriate to express the intended meaning. They might ask themselves questions such as:

Which form am I to use, the passive or the active?

Do I have to use any narrative tenses, and if so, which one, and why?

Thus, the focus would be here to build procedural knowledge by sensitizing learners to the forms available and enabling them to select the most appropriate form for a certain context or use (Bourke, 2008).

Teaching the Past Perfect within this Approach

In fact, perfect tenses make the bridge between different times connecting, for instance, past and present using the present perfect, and two events which both happened in the past using the past perfect.

The past perfect consists of two elements: the past form of the auxiliary verb "have" and the past participle of the main verb. It mostly refers to "previous" times in the past That is, when you have marked when one event happened (using past simple), then past perfect will refer back to a time before that. For example, in the sentence "I came part of the way by taxi because the bus broke down", the bus broke down during my journey, so I had to change to a taxi. However, the sentence "I came part of the way by taxi because the bus had broken down" does not only indicate the time order, but indicates that the speaker knew or found out that the bus was not coming when or before they started the journey, and taking the taxi was a decision they made, not forced on them by circumstances.

The past perfect is also used in order to establish causal connection between two clauses, even when a time distinction between the two events is already made clear by a conjunction (Graver,1974).Sentences like "After he had given the police his name and address, he was allowed to go" illustrate this meaning (i.e. Because the police were in possession of the necessary information, they allowed him to go).

Moreover, it is frequently used in association with the adverbs "already, just, yet, still and never", as well as the prepositions 'for', and 'since'.

Thus, an important teaching suggestion is to help students to differentiate the realization of the past tense from that of the perfective aspect in the past perfect form. In other words, they need to know that there are two different syntactic realizations concerning time in the past perfect (Nakagawa, 2003), which indicate two different time scopes related to each other.

Since both the past tense and the perfect aspect indicate past time, there seems to be an overlap of meaning in the combination of the two time indicators. To describe the semantic characteristics of the past perfect, it is essential to note the semantic differences between the two forms. While the past tense basically describes time in the past in

a definite way, the past perfect describes time in the past in an indefinite way. Huddleston (2002:124) plainly describes this relation between the past element and the perfect element within the past perfect as follows:

"When primary tense combines with the perfect, it gives the temporal location not of the situation itself, but of the time of the orientation that the situation is interior to. The past tense in the past perfect provides the definite point of the past to which the indefinite time of the perfect aspect is related ."

This explanation provides us with a significant implication for our teaching. When students have trouble in understanding the past perfect, they often fail to interpret what the past tense marked by the inflection of 'have' actually indicates. Once students grasp the concept of the time of orientation which the perfective aspect is related to, it will greatly enhance their understanding of the past perfect.

Quirk et al.(1985:195) clarify that "the past perfect usually has the meaning of 'past-in-the-past ' and can be regarded as an interior version either of the present perfect or of the simple past" As an example, the following two sentences are cited :

- I told her the parcel did not arrive.
- I told her the parcel had not arrived.

In the first, the time of telling and the time of arrival of the parcel can be the same .There is no clue to know the sequence of the two events of the past. Although we can understand the meaning of the sentence by the context, it is still ambiguous because it implies either that the parcel would never arrive, or that the parcel had not arrived yet.

On the contrary, in the second sentence, the sequence of the two events is clearly indicated by the use of the simple past and the past perfect. This means that the past perfect is used when it is necessary to indicate the difference of the time of the past events.

Moreover, understanding the three implications of the present perfect is of great help in this connection. According to Quirk et al.(1985:193), these implications are:

- that the relevant time zone leads up to the present.
- that the event is recent.

-that the result of the action still obtains at the present time.

Thus, if we shift the time of orientation from the present to the finite time of the past, the implications are also true to the past perfect. The following sentence might clarify this point:

"When we bought it, the house had been empty for several years." Here, the time zone of the emptiness of the house leads up to the time of the purchase, which is the time of orientation.

For teaching the past perfect, gaining insights from language awareness approach, several teaching strategies and activities are suggested in the literature .Story-telling and timeline might be implemented as inductive ways here. Besides providing fun, stories could provide a meaningful context for students, which enable them to have the sense of the sequence of the event more concretely (Nakagawa, 2003). Timeline also might be helpful by showing the sequence of the event though it sometimes leads to some misconceptions.

Teachers might present other activities such as asking a student to volunteer some information about his /her life and write a sample timeline on the board using the past tense, including a variety of events. Bourke (2008:16) mentions a group of activities and techniques for the same purpose, including problem-solving, error detection and correction, paraphrasing, sentence combining, language games and grammaring. Grammaring might involve asking students to decide as to which subordinator is correct to use and how it can be used to express sequence of time in the past. In general, through such activities, students are encouraged to construct the time framework of the past events.

Avoiding False Language Awareness

Sometimes, instruction itself contributes to false language awareness. According to Svalberg (2001:202),

"There are many ways in which misconceptions can be transmitted. These include misleading factual information, misleading terminology, misleading illustrations and misleading contexts."

For instance, many teachers insist on telling students that English has three tenses: past, present and future, while English has two tenses only : past and present. In this regard, Svalberg (ibid)

argues that presenting 'future' as a tense on a par with past and present has the potential to obscure patterns of tense use in English. In fact, the concept of past and present reference time can help highlight patterns of language use which are otherwise difficult for learners to discern.

As for the past perfect, it says nothing about how long ago the event happened, but only that it happened before another time in the past. Thus, classroom instruction which does not make the distinction between past and present reference time clear is therefore likely to contribute to difficulties in the acquisition of the past perfect.

In a grammaticality judgment test, Svalberg (ibid) found that another learner misconception was that the past perfect could be used in a context like the following:

* As she had broken her leg, the class is cancelled today.

The reason for making this mistake, according to Bardovi-Harlig (1994), is related to the fact that the past perfect is usually very late acquired and learners are likely to associate it with time depth. In other words, as they become more proficient, they become more prone to perceiving past perfect as referring to events a long time ago.

The persistence of the idea that perfect has some thing to do with time depth could indicate an attempt by learners to construct their own interim tense system .It would not be surprising for them to assume such a system since in many languages time depth is an organizing principle (Svalberg, 2001). In fact, distance in time is of no importance in the English tense system. What matters is the sequence of events and whether events are related to the past or the present.

Sometimes, misleading illustrations can reinforce such misconceptions. When timelines are used to clarify the use of the past perfect, they might create this false impression of time depth, specially if the 'present' is included on the timeline.

In fact, if teachers intend to develop students language awareness, they need to show that the language system is made up of several parts including grammar rules ,functions ,vocabulary , social usages and intonation patterns. They also need to make clear that the same function can be expressed in many different ways, and can be transferred and re-used in other contexts.

To avoid spreading false language awareness, EFL teachers need to do more to check their own awareness and improve it constantly through in-service courses. According to Borg (1996:63),

"Teachers need to develop a disposition to constantly review their own beliefs about languages, and to be open to the possibility that these may require modification."

Views of some English specialists and instructors over the teaching of the past perfect

The researchers interviewed five English specialists and instructors in Palestine with regard to their ways of teaching the past perfect in order to find out their attitudes and views over this matter. The two questions raised were:

How do you see the concept of the past perfect ought to be taught?

To what extent do you think your way of teaching might lead to promoting past perfect awareness?

Their views and practices are presented in the appendix at the end of this paper.

Conclusion

It has been found that effective L2 teaching requires input processing combined with focus on form. In other words, we have to find a balance between giving learners the opportunities for developing language awareness (i.e acquisition) and focusing on forms (i.e learning). Thus, language is no longer looked at as a fixed number of structures presented in a linear fashion, but as a dynamic process in which learners themselves are actively involved (Bourke,2008)

Language awareness approach has to do with developing learners' understanding of features of the target language. It relies on input processing, exploring language in context, noticing patterns, inferring a rule and testing it against further data.

Teaching the past perfect successfully requires developing learners' awareness of the meanings and uses with which this form is associated.

In Palestine, it seems that instructors, whether at universities or

at schools, have different views over the teaching of this tense. This means there is a need for in-service training courses for English teachers. Such courses ought to emphasize and promote the awareness of the meaning and uses of this tense in English.

Thus, it is hard to see how the past perfect could be acquired at all if the pattern of relationships between past verb forms and past and present reference time has not been established first. In other words, it is very important for learners, as Nunan (1998:108) puts it: "to press their grammatical resources into communicative use".

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Appendix

Views over the teaching of the past perfect

Instructor One:

“ I think students have to command the use of this verb tense first. That could be done through giving several examples that show how actions are performed in the past, what is completed, and what started after the completion of the other action. Students should know how to form the past perfect tense. This could be done by writing the formula on the board or by encouraging students to deduce it through examples. I think awareness could be achieved through using L1 and by giving the most appropriate translation of this tense in the mother tongue.” (Dr. Sufian Abu Arrah / Al-Quds Open University / Jenin)

Instructor two:

“ The past perfect is usually taught deductively. That is, teachers write the rule on the board and give examples. The focus is, in fact, on the form rather than the meaning and use. In my opinion, this is a traditional way of teaching grammar and it doesn't lead to the

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past perfect awareness. I think grammar should be taught inductively through situations and authentic texts. The teacher should create a situation and encourage students to talk; then the rule is elicited. In this way, the focus is on the meaning and is related to students' needs and to the real world applications." (Mr. Riyadh Ayasseh / Educational Supervisor / Qabatia Directorate of Education)

Instructor Three:

" I start teaching this tense by giving examples. After that, I write the rule on the board, emphasizing the use of connective words to show the difference between the simple past and the past perfect. I ask students to provide some examples of their own. Moreover, I ask some questions and demand them to give answers using this tense. As well, I tell them to write some sentences after giving them some clues. Drama activities and techniques are used sometimes. In my opinion, students face much difficulty in using the irregular past participle forms. Teachers should stress this aspect in teaching." (Ruqayya Abu Alrub / English language teacher / Qabatia Basic School for Girls)

Instructor Four:

" I start by giving examples on the use of the past perfect and derive the rules depending on such examples. I mean by 'rule' something mechanical, that is, the student has to realize the context related to social life. My experience as a lecturer at the Arab American University indicates that this way of teaching has been fruitful since it is connected with the real situation of the students." (Mr. Usama Jarrar / Arab American University)

Instructor Five:

" first, to me the 'perfect' means something which has been completed and the 'past perfect' means past in the past. As a school principal, I have witnessed some teachers during teaching this form. They usually start by writing the rule on the board and clarify that to the students. However, this is not the case in the real situation use where both the teachers and the students replace the past perfect by the simple past." (Mr. Yahya Tahayneh / School Principal at Taanck Basic Boys' School and part-time English Supervisor at Al-Quds Open University / Jenin)