Teaching language as a system

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Introduction

While language has been accepted as a system composed of subsystems (e.g. morphological and syntactic systems), ideas about what it encompasses and how it works constantly evolve. Earlier linguistic theories, such as structural linguistics (Saussure, 1916; Bloomfield, 1933) and generative linguistics (Chomsky, 1957), consider language a largely autonomous system of structural rules, paying inadequate attention to meaning and use (i.e. to pragmatics – how language users convey and interpret meanings in a given context). Contemporary linguistic theories, such as systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and cognitive linguistics (CL, referring specifically to the linguistic theory developed by, among others, Langacker, 1987, 1991), develop a more comprehensive view that considers meaning and use as central. SFL treats language as a paradigmatic system for social interaction – a system of choices created and made by language users for communicating meaning in various social contexts. In this view, form, meaning and function interact to create a unified meaning-making “system network” (Halliday, 1994: xxvi); meaning is primary in this system network. Similarly, CL (Langacker, 1987, 1991) also considers meaning central in language, but it differs in that it considers human cognition key in the understanding and use of language. This theory treats language as a usage-based and conceptualisation-driven symbolic system for communication. Most importantly, in addition to form, meaning, context and use, language users and their construals (i.e. how speakers may frame an event differently or choose to select/focus on different aspects of it) play an extremely important role in meaning-making. This is because in each communication event, ultimately it is the language user who assesses the choices of form in context and decides which choices to make in order to best convey the meaning at hand. Furthermore, the choices made by language users will in turn affect the language system itself, making language a dynamic rather than a static system (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; for further discussion of dynamic systems, see Mercer, this volume).

These more inclusive perspectives regarding language advocated by SFL and CL help form what we would like to call a ‘comprehensive systems view’. This view has three important assumptions, drawn from the previous discussion. First, every language is simultaneously embedded in social systems and conceptual systems. Second, the function and meaning of a system are latent in its form, as mediated by speaker/writer construal. Third, language, being embedded in and interacting with social and conceptual systems mediated by the human mind, is a complex, dynamic system. This chapter will examine how such a comprehensive systems view might help us better understand language and, consequently, language teaching, especially the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, or lexicogrammar.
Understanding this view is important for language teaching because which language system view is adopted has a significant impact on how language is taught. For example, embodying the autonomous system view inherent in structural linguistics, traditional approaches to language teaching, such as the grammar–translation and audiolingual methods, focused mostly on form, as evidenced by the heavy grammar explanation in the grammar–translation method and the extensive use of sentence pattern drills in the audiolingual method and by the little attention that was paid to the meaningful use of the target language (see Hall, this volume, ch. 15 for further discussion of these methods). In contrast, embracing the comprehensive systems view that language is a usage-based system of choices embedded in social and conceptual systems requires language teaching to focus on function, meaning, use and context (including discourse, cultural and situational contexts) so as to help students develop the ability to use language for effective communication in the social contexts in which they find themselves.

Below, we first describe the critical theoretical issues related to language and language learning from the comprehensive systems view. Then we explore, with specific lexicogrammatical examples, the pedagogical implications of these principles. Finally, we briefly discuss the challenges and debates involved in language teaching informed by this comprehensive systems view.

Critical theoretical issues

Meaning and function are central

The first issue to understand is that, while form is important, meaning and function are central in language use and learning. The centrality of meaning/function directly affects how we analyse and organise language. For example, in SFL, language or its form serves three main functions: ideational (expressing experience/understanding about our world, e.g. Mexico is in North America), interpersonal (enacting our complex interpersonal relations, e.g. Excuse me, Johnny), and textual (organising communication in a cohesive manner, e.g. Let’s switch gears/topics) (Halliday, 1994). Therefore, SFL language analysis considers not only syntactic but also semantic and pragmatic functions, as illustrated in Figure 29.1.

Such semantic/functional analysis enables us to better understand language as a system of choices for meaning-making. For example, it helps us understand that the subject in the Figure 29.1 utterance is the agent of the action (i.e. the person/thing directly affected by the verb), rather than the recipient or patient, and that the agent is chosen as the subject because it is the theme (which is often known information), as we typically begin a sentence with known information and proceed to the rheme (which is usually new information, presented typically in the predicate). We also know that ‘surprisingly’ expresses the speaker’s mood/modality about the event to the listener (hence performing an interpersonal function). Such an analysis enables us to see that language choices are not made in isolation but in meaningful discourse and situation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Surprisingly,</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>cooked</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syntactic:</td>
<td>adverbial</td>
<td>subject</td>
<td>verb</td>
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<td>Semantic:</td>
<td>interpersonal theme</td>
<td>actor/agent theme</td>
<td>process rheme</td>
<td>recipient</td>
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<td>Pragmatic:</td>
<td>mood adjunct</td>
<td>theme</td>
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Figure 29.1 An example of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions within SFL analysis
contexts. As a very simple example, the choice of which greeting form to use (e.g. *How are you? What’s up?* or *Howdy?*) will be determined by, among other things, the kind of relationship you have with the greeted person and the physical and social contexts of the greeting. Understanding the important role of discourse/situation context is imperative in language learning, as it tells learners how to use such information to make appropriate, meaningful language choices (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000).

Meanwhile, CL posits that meaning is inherent in all language forms, including grammatical structures; this meaning is rooted in our embodied experience (the experience gained through our body, i.e. its five senses) and our powerful capacities for conceptualisation. The claim that meaning is embodied is the claim that meaning “is structured by our constant encounter and interaction with the world via our bodies and brains” (Gallese and Lakoff, 2005: 456). Even the most pedestrian functions of language, like the use of repetition for emphasis (e.g. *He is very, very good*), are based on an embodied conceptualisation, in this case, the embodied schema that repetition increases intensity, or that more form signifies more meaning (Kövecses, 2006). Also, our everyday language usages are largely based on embodied conceptual metaphors. For example, based on our embodied experience that being balanced enables us to stand firmly while being unbalanced often causes us to fall, we use expressions where *balanced* means positive while *unbalanced* means negative, such as *balanced vs unbalanced approach/budget*. Similarly, because of the fact that when we are healthy, we are usually ‘up’ and active, but when we are very ill, we tend to lie ‘down’, expressions with *up* are generally positive while those with *down* are often negative, as can be seen in *brighten/cheer/go/thumbs up* vs. *break/go/let/thumbs down*.

It is also important to note that in CL, the atomic elements of language as a system are *symbolic units*, or *constructions*, which are pairings of form and meaning. Each of these pairings is understood to contain a *phonological pole* (form) and a *semantic pole* (meaning). As such, constructions may vary in size, ranging from something as small as a morpheme (e.g. the plural-*s*) to something as large as a sentence (e.g. *What’s up?*). Hence, there is no rigid separation between lexis and grammar in this approach to language structures, an issue we will return to later. Constructions fall into three subcategories: filled (prefabricated) constructions (e.g. *What’s up?/kick the bucket*), partially-filled (semi-prefabricated) constructions (e.g. *cut [someone] short* and *what’s this [dog] doing [on my sofa]?* also known as the WXDY construction), and unfilled, schematic constructions (i.e. the productively abstract patterns such as the V+N+N ‘cause to receive’ construction, as instantiated by *gave someone a book/knitted someone a sweater*) (Holme, 2009: 184–204). While the first two kinds of constructions are clearly associations of form and meaning, the real advance of CL was showing that even the most schematic sentence frame, the unfilled construction, was also a form/meaning pairing (Goldberg, 1995, 2006). As such, the latter type is also the most productive, as its meanings are likewise maximally schematic. For example, while verbs like *cook* or *knit* do not inherently contain the meaning of ‘cause to receive’, when used in constructions like *She knitted him a sweater/He cooked her dinner*, they inherit the cause-receive meaning from the schematic construction they are embedded in. According to CL, language learning is essentially the learning of these three types of meaningful constructions.

**Language as a usage-based system**

The second critical theoretical issue to understand is that, rather than being an autonomous innate system, language is a usage-based system built on embodied experience and conceptualisation. This understanding has important implications for how we teach language. First, being usage based, language learning requires adequate input and output in meaningful communication. In
the case of learning schematic constructions, students need both high token frequency and high type frequency in exposure. Tokens are individual instances of a construction, while types are different categories of the construction. For example, while *gave someone a book/gave someone money* are different tokens (although the same type) of the schematic ‘cause to receive’ construction, *give someone something, cook someone something and knit someone something* are each different types of this schematic construction.

Also, because this system is rooted in our embodied experience/conceptualisation, we see patterns of use that are motivated by embodied conceptualisations. Beyond employing repetition for emphasis and the embodied conceptualisation of ‘being balanced/up meaning being positive’, we see this motivated nature of language in the conflation of time and space. For instance, while it is widely and intuitively understood that we speak of time in terms of space (e.g. *I've got a big day in front of me*), what is less well described is the way we exploit this relationship to achieve pragmatic, social goals. For example, the use of the past tense for a present event to show politeness (e.g. *Could you help me?/Here is little something I thought you might like*) is based on our conceptualisation of time in spatial terms: because the use of the past tense creates distance from the present, the present request/suggestion becomes less imposing, hence more polite.

Importantly for language teachers, the experience that shapes language usage and construal is often culture-specific (Kövecses, 2006). This can help explain many of the differences in usages between different languages. For example, English speaking cultures are low-context cultures, where things often need to be specifically stated. In contrast, many Asian cultures (e.g. Chinese and Japanese) are high-context cultures, where many things are often unsaid but understood from contextual information. This may explain the lack of number/tense inflections in these Asian languages. Contextual information makes such inflections redundant, e.g. the adjective *three* in *three book* clearly indicates the plural nature of the noun and the time adverbial *yesterday* in *Yesterday I see a movie* makes clear the past time of the event in some Asian languages. Similarly, a difference in preference over how to express the manner and path (direction) of motion has resulted in two different types of languages: verb-framed languages (e.g. Romance languages) and satellite-framed languages (e.g. Germanic languages) (Talmy, 2000). In the former, the path of motion is encoded in the verb (e.g. *enter/exit* verbs of Latin origin), whereas in the latter the manner of motion is encoded with the path expressed by a prepositional/adverbial phrase (e.g. *walk into/walked out of the room*). This fact about language differences speaks strongly about the need to address culture and experience in language teaching. In short, exploring and understanding the conceptual motivations in language usages may help make language learning more interesting and effective (see Langacker, 2008).

The important role of construal

The third theoretical issue to understand is that speaker/writer construal plays a key role in language use and in helping make language a dynamic, rather than a static, system. This understanding calls for special attention to construal and the dynamic nature of language in language teaching. Construal operations are automatic in language use, and they affect our lexicogrammatical choice in a given context. For example, although both sentences, *He went over the report* and *He went through the report*, refer to the same event, they have each resulted from a different construal, with the former (*went over*) focusing on the completion of the activity and the latter (*went through*) highlighting the care or effort put into reading the report. Understanding how construal operates is especially important in learning lexicogrammatical usages related to prepositions, tenses/aspects and articles. Also, given the embodied nature of human conceptualisation as, explained earlier, embodied learning-based activities (i.e. gestures/movement/visuals) are especially effective in language learning (Holme, 2009).
Teaching language as a system

One more important point related to this theory of language as a dynamic system shaped by language users is that teachers must value learners’ creative use of language, including their errors, because errors are often signs of learning taking place and may help us better understand students’ learning processes. In the section on construction learning later in the chapter, we discuss ways that learner error tells us exactly which constraints they have not acquired. Furthermore, because language is a dynamic adaptive system, the errors of today may become the standard usage of tomorrow; consider the present use of less for modifying count nouns (as in ten items or less) and their used as a singular possessive pronoun (as in Everyone should do their best). The point here is that often learner errors are not aberrations but a part of the natural ecology of language, according to the systems view.

Lexicogrammar

The fourth important theoretical issue is that grammar and vocabulary are the two ends of a single continuum, rather than two rigidly separate domains. This approach to grammar and vocabulary is based on the fact that syntactic structures are often lexically confined, while the use of a lexeme almost always has grammatical implications (Hunston and Francis, 2000). For example, enjoy and love are near-synonymous verbs, but while love can take as its object either an infinitive or a gerund (love to read books and love reading books), enjoy may take only a gerund object, enjoy reading books. Numerous corpus studies have demonstrated the close interconnection between lexis and grammar (e.g. Biber et al., 1999; Hunstan and Francis, 2000). Such findings from corpus research provide strong empirical support for SFL’s view of language as a system of co-constraining choices (choices of, among other things, grammar and lexis simultaneously) and CL’s view of language as a symbolic system made up of symbolic constructions. Corpus research has also shown that prefabricated constructions comprise a large part of natural language and perform important functions (Sinclair, 1991; Biber et al., 1999). Thus, language teaching should integrate lexis and grammar and pay close attention to collocations and constructions (Howarth, 1998; Lewis, 2000), including prefabricated multi-word constructions (which have been variously labelled as formulae, lexical bundles, etc.) and the structural patterns within which a lexical item typically occurs (what Hunstan and Francis (2000) call pattern grammar). It is necessary to note that while some cognitive linguists define a ‘construction’ as “any linguistic structure that is analysable into component parts” (Taylor, 2002: 561), others do not consider a construction to be entirely analysable because “aspects of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts . . .” (Goldberg, 2006: 5). We are using the term ‘construction’ in the former sense.

Pedagogical implications

In this section, we show useful teaching practices guided or supported by the comprehensive systems view, using examples that are related to some basic but universally challenging lexicogrammatical issues (i.e. articles, tense/aspect and prepositions). It is important to note that many of the examples of teaching practices provided here are not new; they are given because they exemplify the teaching principles advocated by the systems view. Before we proceed, a word about sequencing in language teaching is also in order. Given the high importance of meaning/function in the systems view, the key criteria for determining instructional sequence are seen as meaningfulness and usefulness, as determined by students’ needs and proficiency level. In general, we should begin with lexicogrammatical usages that are not only the most meaningful/useful but also the easiest for students to grasp based on what they already know. Hence, a beginning
survival English class will start with the most basic useful survival expressions, accompanied by accessible lexicogrammatical and pragmatic usage information related to the expressions, and then move on to more complex but less essential ones. In contrast, an introductory intensive English programme (IEP) class might begin with the most basic expressions for academic interactions before moving on to more complex ones. Admittedly, it is not always easy to determine what language is most meaningful and useful for a given group of students – great effort is often needed to provide students a systematic, gap-free coverage of the lexicogrammar they need.

**Teaching English articles, tense/aspect and word order:** focusing on meaning/context

As is language in general, the English article system is dynamically integrated into our cognitive systems. Therefore, it is inadequate in language teaching simply to invoke the indefinite article *a/an* as a marker for nonspecific count nouns and the definite article *the* for specific nouns. This is because such an approach fails to take into account the fact that, rather than being markers of some local feature of a noun, English articles constitute a system that dynamically adapts to an evolving awareness of both the context of communication and our interlocutor’s state of knowledge. Consider the following fact: if indeed *a/an* were always for a nonspecific noun and *the* were always for a specific noun, sentences like *I have a dog or I saw a huge bulldog this morning* would be permanently incorrect, since the dogs being referred to are very specific dogs. In this particular case, the speaker uses *a* because s/he believes that the listener is not aware of the referents. There is a similar problem with the commonly employed article usage rule stipulating that when a count noun is mentioned for the first time, *a/an* should be used. The issue is that *the* is in fact always used with a first-mention count noun when the referent can be identified (e.g. can be seen/heard) by the listener in the context. Consider the utterance *Could you please pass me the pen?* where *pen* is mentioned for the first time. In this case, in preparing to ask for the pen, the speaker has dynamically constructed a model of what his or her interlocutor is likely aware of, given the shared, physical context. It is thus clear that we must teach articles in context and help students understand how the speaker’s/listener’s knowledge/perspective affects the use of articles.

The tense/aspect system of English is also closely integrated into broader cognitive and cultural systems. In this case, these systems concern our cognitive ability to maintain a dynamically evolving construal of a discourse and the situation within which it occurs, and our cultural system of indexing these construals through tense/aspect manipulation. Understanding the discourse/situational context and the speaker/writer’s construal in communication is therefore imperative in teaching English tenses/aspects, especially the use of those tenses/aspects that are closely related, such as the simple past and the present perfect, as both may refer to an action/event that occurred in the past (e.g. *I watched the play ‘Hamlet’ last Saturday vs. I’ve watched the play ‘Hamlet’*). Teachers generally do a good job explaining that the present perfect is used to refer to a past action/event when the focus is on the result or the consequence of the past action in the present. However, without using examples in meaningful discourse/situational contexts, it would still be difficult for students to appreciate the difference between the two tenses/aspects. Hence, many teachers provide the students with simple scenarios like the following, where they ask students to explain which of the two tenses/aspects should be used in each blank and why:

Tom: John, would you like to go and watch ‘Hamlet’ tonight?
John: Thanks for asking me, but I *see* it already.
Tom: When did you see it.
John: *I see* it last Friday.
Another pair of closely related tenses/aspects, the present perfect and the present perfect progressive, may be effectively taught through contextualised examples and through an analysis of the speaker/writer's construal/perspective regarding the communication task at hand. For instance, we can have students compare the following examples adapted from Davies’s (2008–) Contemporary Corpus of American English:

1. Psychologists have studied for years the effects of disasters on children. They have produced many important findings on the issue.
2. Scientists at the institute have been studying complex laboratory tests to find out the patterns of the resistance of the disease to treatment.

A close comparison should help students understand which construal is intended by the present perfect in example 1, and how that differs from the construal intended by the use of the present perfect continuous in example 2. In example 1, even though psychologists are likely still studying the effects of disasters and will likely continue, the writer chose the present perfect instead of the present perfect progressive to emphasise what psychologists have accomplished, rather than what they will continue to do. In contrast, in example 2, the focus is the ongoing nature of the study, since the scientists have not found out the patterns in question.

Similarly, discourse/situational context plays a very important role in word order. Here is an example taken from Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 56–57), showing how such information can and should be included in teaching the object placement in separable phrasal verbs:

Edward gave up his reward.
Edward gave his reward up.
Edward gave it [his reward] up.

In sentence level-based autonomous analysis, the sentences are semantically equivalent. However, they are not semantically equivalent from an analysis that encompasses context and function. As mentioned earlier, word order in English is determined largely by whether the information in question is new or old. Therefore, sentence 1 “would be preferred in contexts where the direct object (i.e., the reward) was truly new or specifically emphasized information” but sentence 2 “would be preferred where the direct object had already been mentioned but was not sufficiently recent or well-established as old information to justify the use of the pronoun [it]” as in sentence 3 (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000: 56–57). Specifically, in response to a question like What did Edward give up? sentence 1 would be the right choice. In responding to a question such as What did Edward do with his reward?, the right response would be sentence 3. As for sentence 2, it would be an appropriate response for situations where ‘reward’ has a somewhat less recent mention, e.g. ‘The reward – the whole thing – it’s very embarrassing, isn’t it? What did poor Edward decide to do?’ (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000: 57).

It is important to emphasise that teaching techniques involving the kinds of in-context comparisons used above do more than just illustrate the conditions of alternation; they make the learner step into the cognitive shoes of the speaker of the target language, so to speak, and adopt his or her perspective on the events in question (Tomasello, 1999), for it is well-known that tense/aspect systems often vary from language to language (e.g. English having no ‘imperfect’, a tense/aspect found in Romance languages). These inter-perspectival functions of social learning have long been recognised as a crucial element of human cultural transmission and a powerful way of teaching. Through contextualised examples, students can better understand how...
Teaching prepositions and parts of speech: attending to conceptualisation/construal

Prepositions are critically important to the cooperative construction of meaning in everyday contexts. Consider the difference between getting somewhere at 12:00, on Tuesday or in 2008. Indeed, these small words are so important to establishing meaning that corpus studies have shown that twelve prepositions are among the fifty most frequently used words in English (Liu, 2013). Just as they are critically important, prepositions are simultaneously very difficult to learn. Their difficulty lies in the well-known fact that most prepositions are polysemous and multifunctional. Functionally, many prepositions also often work as adverbs or particles, i.e. used without a noun as their object (as in The deal is up and give up/give up something). A key point to remember is that the various meanings and functions of a preposition are all extended, often metaphorically, from a core, literal spatial meaning. Therefore, it is ill-advised in the teaching of prepositions to treat the locatives as canonical and the other uses as idiosyncrasies to be learned use-by-use in a rote fashion. The systems approach would allow us to work within a consistent framework, employing the embodied, spatial meanings of prepositions to assist learners in grasping their respective extended metaphorical meanings. Thus, understanding the semantic networks of prepositions and the conceptual motivations behind them is crucial for understanding the use of prepositions.

In fact, recent research has shown that exploring embodied conceptual motivations and using visual aids/body actions can significantly enhance L2 learning of prepositions and phrases involving preposition particles (Boers, 2000; Tyler, 2012). For example, Boers’s (2000) study shows that having learners explore the embodied conceptualisation that up means ‘higher/more’ and is hence generally positive while down means ‘lower/less’ and is hence generally negative helped students more effectively learn verbal phrases involving the two prepositions as particles, such as brighten/cheer/fire/go/move up and beat/break/fall/go/let down. In two studies reported in Tyler (2012), CL-based instruction with the use of visual aids (e.g. diagrams and video clips) was found to be significantly more effective than traditional teaching in helping learners grasp the use of prepositions to/for/at.

Here we would like to illustrate how visuals like Figures 29.2 and 29.3 (adapted from Liu, 2013: 151–152) may be used to help students better understand the semantic differences among at, on and in, three frequently used but also difficult-to-distinguish prepositions for referencing spatial/temporal locations. The two figures schematise these three spatial concepts in terms of the specificity of the preposition. Figure 29.2 shows that at typically designates a very small and hence maximally specific spatial/temporal point. On usually covers a surface or two-dimensional area, signifying a space less specific than that referred to by at. In is used for a three-dimensional space that can be either very large or small. The more literal pictures in Figure 29.3 help illustrate the semantic differences among at on, and in even when they are used in the same noun phrase: at/on/in the corner. After learning the general semantic patterns of the prepositions, we can help students deal with the exceptions. This should be much more effective than teaching without enabling students to see the patterns.

Knowing the ‘sharp point’ sense of at can also help understand (and explain) its use to identify a target (e.g. bark/kick/shoot at someone/something) and help explain the difference between throwing something at someone (as a target) and throwing something to someone (as a goal/receiver) (Tyler, 2012: 151–153). Similarly, knowing the ‘on two-dimensional surface’ meaning of on can
help one appreciate its extended meaning of being secure or being where it is supposed to be, e.g. on target/topic/time/track. Also, knowing the three-dimensional meaning of in can assist us in explaining the metaphorical use of in in phrases such as in condition/control/shape/trouble, where a state is conceptualised as a three-dimensional thing. It is also important to reiterate that, as shown in the aforementioned example of went over vs. went through a report, construal plays an extremely important role in the use of prepositions.

Similarly, conceptualisation/construal plays an equally important role in the classification of parts of speech, a critical point often overlooked in our teaching. While common definitions (e.g. a noun is a thing or person and a verb refers to an action) may work for beginning learners, such definitions are inadequate or problematic for many words, such as noun-turned-verbs (e.g. baby in Don’t baby me, or room in roomed with someone) and nouns that actually express an action (e.g. completion and fight). A conceptualisation/construal-based definition can help explain these difficult cases. A noun in CL refers to anything that is conceptualised/construed as a ‘reified thing’ that is static and holistic, while a verb designates what is construed as a process, which is relational and sequential in nature, a definition system clearly illustrated by Langacker (1999) with the word yellow. Typically used as an adjective, yellow can also function as a noun referring to a particular thing in the realm of colour (e.g. The yellows are winning) and also as a verb expressing a process in which the colour of a given thing gradually changes into the colour of yellow (e.g. The shirt yellowed with age). This conceptualisation-based approach can be used to help learners better understand difficult parts of speech issues, including the common practice and value of

\[\text{Figure 29.2 Semantic and usage differences among at, on and in} \]
\[\text{Source: Adapted from Liu, 2013: 151–152, by permission of Taylor & Francis, parent company of Routledge.}\]

\[\text{Figure 29.3 Illustration of the semantic differences among at, on and in} \]
\[\text{Source: Adapted from Liu, 2013: 151–152, by permission of Taylor & Francis, parent company of Routledge.}\]
‘nominalisation’ in formal writing, where verb phrases are turned into noun phrases, as shown in the transformation of sentence A into B below:

A  Tom completed the project in a timely manner and as a result he received a bonus.
B  Tom’s timely completion of the project earned him a bonus.

By construing the process of a verb as a static thing, nominalisation produces concise statements that contain equal amounts of information. Such a practice is difficult to deal with pedagogically, when noun-ness is assumed to be inherent to the things being named rather than the product of the way they are construed (Langacker, 1999; Taylor, 2002).

**Teaching collocations and constructions: stressing meaning/function in lexicogrammar**

Collocations in L2 pedagogy have been treated largely as arbitrary lexical units whose learning relies heavily on memorisation (Lewis, 2000). However, recent corpus-based cognitive analysis (e.g. Liu, 2010) has shown that collocations are generally motivated (i.e. not arbitrary but having a semantic or logical reasoning) if examined intra-lingually. When we focus our teaching on the motivations for collocations, we can help students grasp their use more effectively. Table 29.1 provides an example of how this can be done in learning the typical noun collocations of four common English verbs: *make/take/do/have*. These verbs have often been labelled ‘delexicalised’ or ‘light’ verbs (i.e. verbs that have little meaning when used in collocation with other words). The basic idea is that when students conduct a close analysis based on their encyclopedic knowledge (knowledge based on life experience and learning, see Taylor, 2002: 439–442), they will see that these collocations are actually motivated by the core meanings of the verbs.

Specifically, we can ask students to discuss which verb and its collocations involve more initiation, planning and effort. It should not be difficult for them to tell that *make* and its collocations do, for we know that it generally requires more initiation, planning and effort to *make* something than to *take* or *do* something and that *making* a change/commitment/decision/effort etc. *usually* entails more initiation and effort than *taking* a break/bus/chance/nap or *doing* chores/dishes/errands/homework etc. Empirical studies have shown that understanding the motivations of lexical usages significantly enhances students’ learning (e.g. Boers, 2000). Making students aware of this semantic dimension based on their encyclopedic knowledge of the world and then asking

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<th>Make</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make a case</td>
<td>Take a bath</td>
<td>Do business</td>
<td>Have an affair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a change</td>
<td>Take a break</td>
<td>Do chores</td>
<td>Have an accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a choice</td>
<td>Take a bus/taxi</td>
<td>Do dishes</td>
<td>Have an argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a commitment</td>
<td>Take a chance</td>
<td>Do drugs</td>
<td>Have a conversation</td>
</tr>
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<td>Make a contribution</td>
<td>Take a look</td>
<td>Do errands</td>
<td>Have difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a decision</td>
<td>Take a nap</td>
<td>Do exercises</td>
<td>Have a dream</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make a difference</td>
<td>Take an offer</td>
<td>Do harm</td>
<td>Have experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make an effort</td>
<td>Take a rest</td>
<td>Do homework</td>
<td>Have a feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a living</td>
<td>Take a phone call</td>
<td>Do laundry</td>
<td>Have fun/a good time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a mistake</td>
<td>Take a shower</td>
<td>Do research</td>
<td>Have a look</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a phone call</td>
<td>Take a test</td>
<td>Do things</td>
<td>Have a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make progress</td>
<td>Take a walk</td>
<td>Do work</td>
<td>Have trouble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

them to explore how these collocations are different accordingly can guide students to uncover the typical meanings and motivations of the verbs for themselves. They may notice that the do collocations frequently refer to routine, often daily, activities. They should also find that the verb have here is in the sense of ‘experience’ rather than ‘possess’, because the verb have can be replaced by the verb experience in most of the have collocations without any change of meaning, e.g. experience (instead of have) a/an accident/break/difficulty/dream/feeling/fun/problem etc. In short, analysis like this should help learners better grasp the semantic patterns and then the use of the collocations. Again, after exploring the general semantic usage patterns of these common verbs, we can discuss the exceptions. In fact, there are reasons for many of the exceptions, some of which we know although some of which we do not know yet. For example, the reason we say students take tests (an activity that is clearly not easy), not make tests, is because the latter has been blocked by the fact that teachers make tests.

As explained earlier, of the three types of constructions mentioned earlier (i.e. filled/prefabricated, partially-filled/semi-prefabricated and unfilled/schematic), the schematic constructions (such as the aforementioned ‘cause to receive’ construction) are the most productive and are therefore very important in L2 learning. High token and type frequency is critical in learning this type of construction. Given the limited amount of input available in L2 learning (especially in a foreign language learning context), we should first provide students with adequate input of the prototypical form of the construction being taught before we move onto the less prototypical forms. This is because research has shown that skewed input and practice of the prototypical form of a construction facilitate its acquisition (Goldberg, 2006; Ellis, 2012). Let us look at the V+N+Adj construction, part of what Goldberg (1995: 180–198) calls the ‘resultative construction’, as shown in the following examples (2–4 from Goldberg):

1. He made her happy.
2. She painted the house red.
3. Harry shot Sam dead.
4. He talked himself hoarse.

This construction typically means the verb/action causes a change of state in the object/patient; the make X adj is the most prototypical form, whereas talk oneself adj is arguably the least prototypical in the group. First, therefore, expose students to many examples of the prototypical form and some other common forms of the construction by either having them do a corpus search or providing them with selected corpus examples, when no corpus is easily accessible. Then, have students identify, from the examples, the key components (V+N+Adj) and the change-of-state meaning of the construction. Afterwards, ask students to find more examples of the construction in a corpus and have them produce meaningful sentences of their own, based on the examples. That is, students should be encouraged to use the construction creatively (Holme, 2009).

While the last step (having students use the construction to generate their own sentences) is crucial in construction learning, it is also important to note that while encouraging students to use constructions creatively, teachers should simultaneously help students understand the constraints on each specific construction. This is because schematic constructions often have constraints (Goldberg, 1995, 2006; Taylor, 2002) that are not evident to L2 learners, who subsequently over-generalise their use. In the case of this resultative construction, learners may say:

*She shot him wounded/killed. (adapted from Goldberg, 1995; Taylor, 2002)

Teachers can use such errors to help students understand the constraints and restrictions about this resultative construction. Here, the *shot him wounded example violated the ‘end-of-state’
constraint, which stipulates that the resulting state generally must be an end state, such as ‘dead, open/shut, free . . .’ (Goldberg, 1995: 195). In contrast, the *shot him killed example violated the ‘restriction against deverbal adjectives’, i.e. “resultatives cannot be adjectives derived from either present or past participles” (Goldberg, 1995: 197). Awareness of such constraints can help L2 learners avoid overextending the use of the construction.

In every language, there are a large number of prefabricated multi-word constructions, including formulaic sequences and idioms, that are critical to fluent language production. These include sequences like in spite of and in order to, and it is important to teach these structures along with their functions and the contexts they are typically used in (Liu, 2013). This can be easily done today because studies (e.g. Biber et al., 1999) have so far identified not only many of the most common multi-word constructions in various registers (e.g. spoken, news, academic writing and medicine) but also their main functions (e.g. ideational/informational, interpersonal and/or textual/discoursal functions). For example, I wonder if you + v and Could/ would you please + v are common formulae for making a request, while data/results/surveys show/indicate/suggest that-clause is a frequent construction in academic writing for reporting and/or interpreting research results. Also, we now know that, excluding phrasal verbs, most idioms (e.g. chicken out/drop the ball/hit a homerun) are not highly frequent and are used typically to express evaluations, often negative ones, of an individual/event for a heightened effect (Moon, 1998). In teaching the highly frequent formulaic constructions, teachers often draw students’ attention to these constructions by, among other things, highlighting them in the teaching material and also guide students in exploring the functions of the constructions in context. In ESP and EAP classes, teachers also often provide students with a list of the most common constructions and their main functions in the students’ discipline/field of study. Such lists are readily available today. Of course, most importantly, teachers should engage students in speaking and writing activities that require them to use the constructions they are learning.

Challenges and debates

As with any teaching approaches, there are challenges involved in teaching language as a comprehensive system. The greatest challenge is arguably the complexity of the issues covered, such as construal and discourse/situational context. These issues are especially difficult for beginning and low-level students. Given the fairly widely accepted view that simple and clear lexicogrammatical explanations that sacrifice some accuracy are more helpful for beginning/low-level students than elaborate accurate explanations (Liu, 2013), it is debatable whether and/or to what extent such complex systems issues should be addressed in teaching low-level students.
Another challenge is the amount of time required to cover all of these complex issues, considering especially the limited instruction time L2 teachers generally have and the large amount of input/output required for learning the various types of constructions, especially schematic constructions.

Another important challenge or issue of debate is whether lexis and grammar can always be taught together effectively. Perhaps, in some cases (e.g. for lower-level students struggling with basic grammatical issues like tense/aspect and word order), it may be helpful to have classes devoted exclusively to essential grammar skills. By the same token, there may be some words (e.g. technical vocabulary) that can be effectively learned simply as vocabulary items without any discussion of grammar. One more challenge is related to determining language teaching content and sequencing. As noted earlier, it is not easy to determine what is most meaningful and useful for the learner, especially when we also need to consider other important factors, such as the accessibility of the language according to the students’ proficiency level and background. Furthermore, we also have to make sure that sequencing determined by usefulness does not result in knowledge gaps. An additional challenge is the aforementioned issue of how to promote creative use of the target language constructions being taught while simultaneously helping students understand the constraints on these constructions.

**Future directions**

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that it is important to present language as it is embodied in ourselves and embedded in our social, cultural and cognitive systems. There are, of course, challenges involved in implementing this approach. However, these challenges should not stop us from trying to implement and enhance this meaningful, though complex, approach to language teaching, because it may help make language teaching more engaging and effective. Furthermore, as reported earlier, research has provided encouraging evidence for the use of this approach. With dedication and effort from all teachers, we are sure we can and will make teaching language as a comprehensive system a successful endeavour.

**Discussion questions**

- This chapter has mentioned some pedagogical implications and challenges the systems view of language brings to language teaching. What is your take on them, and what other implications and challenges do you see?
- How far do you agree that lexis and grammar are the two ends of one continuum? What advantages and disadvantages (or challenges) do you see in integrating lexis and grammar in language teaching?
- Consider these ways of describing the same event: *he went home* and *he made his way home*. How are they different in terms of the way they construe the action of *going*? How do you teach students the issue of construal in questions like this so they can use language to effectively communicate their meaning?

**Related topics**

Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Complexity and language teaching; Corpora in the language classroom; Language and culture in ELT; Sociocultural theory and the language classroom; Teaching language skills.
Further reading


References


Teaching language as a system


