

Usage-based Constructions in Discourse: Second Language Applications

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Cognitive linguistic approaches to acquisition and grammar are just beginning to have an impact on theories and methods of second language acquisition. Second language teachers have generally relied on traditional structural-functional descriptions of language as the basis for grammatical descriptions and on formalist theories as the basis for second language acquisition studies. Such approaches have often led second language researchers and teachers to dismiss as “a-grammatical” complex structures that develop through contextualized chunking and concatenations of lexical strings (cf. R. Ellis 2006). For example, second language textbooks describe adverbial or prepositional clauses of the kind exemplified in (1) and in (2) as paraphrases, giving students the impression that the variations occur in the same contexts and serve the same functions.

- 1a. *But **since** there is a decrease in taxonomists in the world, they may never get described.*
 1b. *It's dizzyingly complex, **since** every one of those billions of neurons may have a thousand connections.*
 2a. *Industrial giants **like** General Motors began manufacturing with no discernible hitches.*
 2b. ***Like** millions of Americans Catherine Carr, does some of her work on a computer at home.*

Two strands of cognitive linguistic research contest such second language approaches: the form-meaning pairings posited in construction grammar (Goldberg, 2006; Croft 2001) and the focus on contextually-based experience posited in usage-based approaches (Tomasello 2003; Bybee 2010). In second language acquisition, cognitive approaches (Tyler 2010), emergentist theories (N.C. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman 2006), and complex dynamic system approaches (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008) have begun to investigate the application of these principles. Two specific factors in usage-based grammar, the importance of item-specific discourse-based meanings (Thompson 1985, Ford 1993, Diessel 2005, Moder 2010) and the variation of individual discourse experience merit greater attention in second language acquisition and instruction research.

This paper presents investigations of the effectiveness of usage-based cognitive approaches in teaching grammatical constructions to advanced second language learners. Focusing on the structures exemplified above, we developed construction-based pedagogical activities for advanced level ESL composition students using naturally-occurring discourse contexts and form-focused instruction methods. We used a pre-test and post-test design to examine the students' understanding and use of these constructions. We also monitored longer term effects of the instruction on the students' writing and individual variation in paths of acquisition. The results indicated that the instruction improved post-test performance and increased students' noticing of the structures in subsequent input, providing for future acquisition and demonstrating the promise of usage-based cognitive linguistic approaches for SLA.

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