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TEACHING EFL LEARNERS THE PAST PERFECT AND PAST SIMPLE THROUGH COGNITIVE GRAMMAR: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE

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Abstract
Cognitive Grammar (CG) is a relatively new approach to linguistics that is becoming more mainstream in recent years due to its comprehensive description and meaningful elaboration of grammar. CG proponents have been proposing this approach to L2 grammar instruction instead of a more traditional approach that relies heavily on rules. Our main interest is to investigate whether such approach is indeed beneficial to learners, particularly in the learning of English past tenses. Our goal in the current study is therefore to examine the relative effect of CG instruction on Indonesian EFL learners' mastery of two past tenses, simple past and past perfect. These tenses were selected as our instructional targets since most common traditional explanation does not help learners differentiate and use them contextually (Jones & Lock, 2011). Twenty-seven EFL learners studying at a senior high school in Jakarta participated in this quasi-experimental study. They were assigned to one experimental group receiving a two-week pedagogical treatment with pre-test and immediate post-test design. Statistical analyses indicate that the group significantly performed better after the treatment, notably in discourse-related test sections. The results confirm the efficacy of CG which can lend support to its applications in L2 instruction.

Keywords: cognitive grammar, EFL learners, teaching grammar, tense and aspect

Introduction
Issues in L2 grammar teaching have been growing rigorously within the past decades, affirmed by myriad approaches being put forth by ESL/EFL practitioners to enhance grammar learning in classrooms. These include numerous approaches such as PPP (Presentation, Practice, Produce) approach (Ur, 1996), natural approach (Krashen, 1981) and form-focused instruction (Long, 1991). Despite this, as Larsen-Freeman (2015) has pinpointed, such progressive development has hitherto only resulted in modest—if not little—impact on pedagogical grammar due to their incomplete grammar description. She further argues that grammar is still viewed by educators merely as a set of rules with major focus on sentential analysis of the structure. Considering this, it is important that a grammar perspective compensating for this shortcoming be proposed.

Seen to possess a more comprehensively descriptive model of language, Cognitive Grammar (henceforth CG) has undeniably become an alternative that

bears some potential to better EFL grammar teaching. Tyler (2012) suggests that CG—with its meaning-focused representation of grammar—can demonstrate well "the regularities and systemic connection in the language" (p. 5), thus rendering memorization of grammar rules less necessary when learners are able to figure out its inherent meaning. Not only that, CG is argued to offer meaningful and authentic portrayal of grammar because it is based on how human cognition perceives the world in reality and translates it into language use (Langacker, 2008). Many earlier studies have attested to such claim about CG's efficacy, such as articles (Huong, 2005), prepositions (Tyler, Ho & Mueller, 2011), modal verbs (Tyler, Mueller & Ho, 2010), and tense and aspect (Bielak & Pawlak, 2013; Kermer, 2016).

Nonetheless, one can notice how little attention is given by proponents of CG to the teaching of tense and aspect. Until recently, there have been at least three CG-based studies on this topic: present simple versus present continuous (Bielak & Pawlak, 2013; Kermer, 2016) and past simple versus past perfect (Kermer, 2016). Moreover, these studies were not without any limitations, one of which was their lack of discourse-based grammar—one core tenet of CG (Langacker, 2008). In addition to the fact that tense and aspect are still under-investigated, the use of past perfect and past simple is even more barely scrutinized through CG pedagogical application. This is an irony given that many learners still misuse the two tenses particularly in a more contextualized setting (Jones & Lock, 2011).

In response to this, this study endeavors to examine the effect of CG-based instruction on enhancing Indonesian EFL learners' understanding towards the two tenses. Its effectiveness is also further scrutinized with respect to specific tasks which include both controlled and free production skills. At this juncture, two research questions are to be answered in the following study:

1. Does CG-based instruction help students significantly to understand the contextual use of past simple and past perfect?
2. Does CG-based instruction also enhance their understanding towards the tenses as measured by their performance in controlled and free production tasks?

Cognitive Grammar, a field under the study of Cognitive Linguistics, postulates that the focal aspect of grammar is semantics (i.e. meaning) instead of syntax (i.e. form) with the meaning derived from how human cognition perceives the world around them and translates it into language forms (Langacker, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Tyler, 2012). Further elaborated by Langacker (2008), each grammatical form bears its own semantic core and by grasping this 'semantic spin', grammar can be learned more naturally instead of relying on rote memorization of rules. This semantic conceptualization leads to the idea that grammar can be embodied in the form of symbolic accounts or imagery (Taylor, 2008), e.g. visual images, diagrams or semantic abstractions. Through this way, grammar becomes more meaningful and less arbitrary.

Equally essential is the usage-based nature of grammar (Langacker, 2008) which suggests that linguistic forms stem from their recurrence among language users. Grammar is consequently inextricable to the exploitation of discourse where certain grammatical items prevalently occur. Thus, Tyler (2012) strongly asserts that discourse is an important feature to facilitate grammar learning.

All of these CG tenets are also manifested in how English speakers perceive the concept of tense and aspect, including past simple and past perfect (Radden & Dirven, 2007). They posit that in narrative context, past simple refers to a series of bounded (i.e. completed) events in the past whereas past perfect or pluperfect is used to denote a backshift or flashback from a fixed viewing point set in the past. The tense prototypes designed based on Radden & Dirven's (2007) description are as follows:

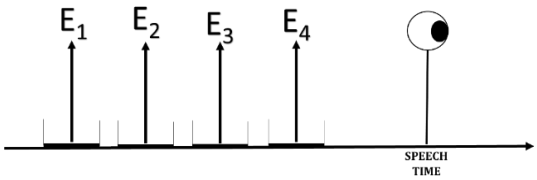


Figure 1. Illustration of Past Simple

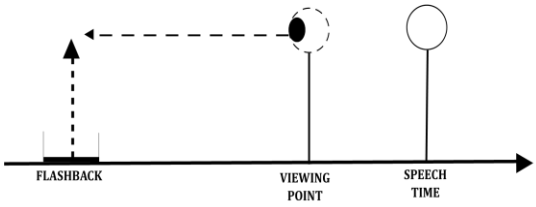


Figure 2. Illustration of Past Perfect

1) *I arrived at the platform for the Tokyo express train at 10:03. The train **had left** at 10:02 sharp. So I had to wait another hour for the next train. (p. 222)*

Example (1) clearly shows that past simple denotes the forward sequence of events that happened in the storyline: the action of 'arriving' and 'waiting'. The event expressed in past perfect, on the other hand, is not part of the narrative progression of events; in fact, it stops the sequence and makes a flashback to explain why I had to wait for another hour (i.e. a reason). As argued by Lascarides & Asher (1993), past perfect can be used to contribute to the coherence of story by providing details of a particular event, e.g. reason, elaboration, parallel or contrasting events. Suffice to say, it is not merely 'an event before another past event' as stated in many grammar books such as those of Azar & Hagen (2009), Murphy (2004) and Swan (2005).

Then, the next question arises regarding how to present these CG theoretical bases in pedagogical grammar. Holme (2009) has proposed several considerations that L2 teachers need to pay heed to when designing CG-based classroom materials.

Based on the ideas of semantic conceptualization and symbolization by Langacker (2008) and Taylor (2008), it is suggested that grammar can be depicted through diagrammatic, pictorial or cinematographic imagery (Holme, 2009). These illustrations are said to be helpful in that they make each grammatical form more predictable, thereby enabling students to recognize meanings with their respective forms. Secondly, grammar needs to be learned by means of explicit metalinguistic description (Holme, 2009; Tyler, 2008). This conforms to the analysis by Norris & Ortega (2000) who pinpoints that explicit grammar explanations could be more beneficial than a pure inductive lesson. Along with explicit information, they also argue that the explanation is complemented with some meaningful tasks. Such is an instance of what Li, Ellis & Zhu (2016) has found pedagogically valuable: Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT). Lastly, as mentioned earlier in regards to the notion of usage, discourse is inevitably necessary to be the primary source of language use. Concerning past perfect and past simple, they are found to be widespread in narrative context according to a corpus study by Biber, Johansson,

Leech, Conrad & Finegan (1999). Using all of these grounds, the researcher designed all of the instruments in such a way that all of them are in line with CG values as will be elaborated in the following section.

Method

Briefly, this study employed a quasi-experimental study with pre-test and post-test design carried out with one experimental group. The study was administered to 27 EFL learners for approximately two weeks. The study consisted of pre-test in the first week and 90-minute treatment divided into two sessions as well as an immediate post-test in the second week.

In this study, 27 senior high school students of grade XI at a private school in West Jakarta participated, but only 20 scores were used because of the fact that some students did not take part in one or more sessions of the study. All of them studied English as a Foreign Language (EFL) formally at school for approximately 135 minutes each week.

There were at least two research instruments utilized in this study: tests and CG handout. Formerly, all of these were validated through a pilot study conducted months prior to the real experiment, which ensured the validity and reliability of the test. The pre-test and post-test were made equal in terms of question items and difficulty. The format of the test per se was adapted from the test used in Bielak & Pawlak's (2013) study with some modifications. The test consisted of three major parts: controlled production (i.e. isolated sentences and mini-narratives) and free production (i.e. translation task). The controlled production was presented in the form of gap-filling items whilst in the latter, students were asked to translate from Indonesian to English and used past perfect and past simple where necessary.

The treatment, including the handout, was likewise designed based on CG principles. First and foremost, the author implemented discourse-based grammar teaching in which a narrative recount text was used as the source of instructional targets, which conforms to the usage-based nature of CG (Langacker, 2008). Following was a set of CG-based explanations of the tenses (i.e. viewing point and flashback) accompanied with pictorial symbolization. Not only pictures, the teacher also showed a *Ratatouille* video as an example that demonstrated how past perfect was used in an authentic context. Lastly, to help students grasp the concepts, interpretation tasks (Ellis, 1995) were given to guide them in mapping forms with their meanings, and a collaborative-output based activity in the form of text editing (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011) was conducted to spur students to produce the target items communicatively with their peers.

The whole research procedure was divided into three major sessions held within two weeks. Initially, the experimental group was given a pre-test for 40 minutes, and after a gap of one week, the classroom activities were divided into two sessions on two consecutive days. In the first session, the subjects were involved in reading comprehension and theory exploration. Teacher explicitly explained the concept of both tenses with the assistance of diagrammatic and cinematographic (i.e. video) representation of the tenses. Ending this session was the first section of the interpretation task in which they needed to match which event from the text is the viewing point or the flashback. On the day after, the students proceeded to the

next section where in they had to match the flashback events with their respective viewing points. Afterwards, they were engaged in text editing activity. They interacted with their partners while delving into the use of the tenses. An immediate post-test was conducted right after this whole treatment.

The obtained data were analyzed statistically with SPSS 17. Normality test of Shapiro-Wilk was necessary to be performed to ensure the normal distribution of the pre-test data because normal data is a prerequisite for t-test to be valid (Howell, 2014). Next, paired-sample t-tests were used to identify whether there was any significant improvement of scores from pre-test to post-test. This was not only done with the overall scores to answer the first research question, but also those of each test section to answer the second one.

Findings and Discussion

As elaborated earlier, before utilizing the paired-sample t-tests to answer the research questions, one needs to make sure that the data is normally distributed. Below is the calculation of normality test:

Table 1. Tests of Normality

Pre-Test Section	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df.	Sig.
Overall Score	.942	20	.265
Isolated Sentences	.963	20	.597
Mini-Narratives	.970	20	.763
Translation Task	.939	20	.228

Table 1 clearly demonstrates that all of the scores to be analyzed are normal, shown by the significance value that exceeds 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). With this data in hand, paired-sample t-test can be utilized as follows:

Table 2. Paired-Sampled T-Test Results (N=20)

Group	Pre-Test		Post-Test		t-score	Significance (p<0.05)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Overall Score	68.47	11.50	80.10	7.22	-4.420	.000
Isolated Sentences	81.35	11.72	86.73	11.60	-1.303	.208
Mini-Narratives	72.00	12.58	81.50	13.79	-3.123	.006
Translation Task	52.07	17.60	72.07	6.36	-4.886	.000

Concerning the first research question about whether CG-based instruction will help EFL learners understand the tenses better, it is observable in Table 2 that with significance value lower than 0.05, there is indeed a significant gain from pre-test to post-test in terms of the students' overall test scores. This conforms to many arguments set forth by CG proponents (Langacker, 2008; Tyler, 2008) who state that CG indeed owns the potential to ameliorate grammar teaching. Furthermore, the results are generally in line with some previous studies (Bielak & Pawlak, 2013;

Kermer, 2016) that pointed out the effectiveness of CG in complementing pedagogical grammar in L2 contexts. However, some intriguing findings are noticeable concerning the second research question of how CG-based instruction affects students' understanding of the tenses when they are put in distinct tasks and contexts.

In the first part of controlled production task (i.e. isolated sentences), the score gain is found to be insignificant as the value is more than 0.05. Despite that, this does not denote that there is inconsistency of results with the overall scores. It is rather misleading to conclude that CG is not actually effective to help students tackle this type of grammar items. Under further scrutiny, there is one major caveat: the ceiling effect phenomenon—one statistical event where most of the subjects score relatively high in the pre-test, and by this way, it is less possible to determine whether a treatment can bring about significant improvement (Vogt, 2005). The data shows that there were at least 55% of the subjects that scored above 80 out of 100 in this test section, meaning that they had formerly understood the tense use at sentential level. Plus, it can be argued that they were already familiar with sentence gap-filling exercises whose format was pervasive in many popular 'traditional' grammar books (Azar & Hagen, 2009; Murphy, 2004).

Unlike isolated sentence part, the scores garnered from both mini-narrative and translation tasks are in consonance with the overall test result. The significant increase of scores is salient in both sections as proven by the significance value that is lower than 0.05. This can be attributed to the fact that the perspectives of CG towards past perfect and past simple are broadened. Students were told during the treatment that both tenses do not merely denote the temporal relation, but they were also made aware of the notion that past perfect was used as well to contribute to the narrative coherence (Lascarides & Asher, 1993).

In general, the findings show that CG-based instruction is effective to be incorporated into grammar teaching. There are indeed a few factors that account for the success of CG in helping learners comprehend and use the instructional items, and all of these are parallel to the arguments proposed by Langacker (2008), Taylor (2008) and Tyler (2012).

Most likely influencing the success of CG in the present study, the substantial role of the usage-based principle of CG is not to be ignored. It is manifested in the form of discourse-based grammar learning wherein every single grammatical item is put contextually into discourse—in this case, narrative discourse. The tenses are constantly explored by the students particularly in regards to their authentic use and function when utilized in a text. This could fill the gap of what earlier CG-based studies of Bielak & Pawlak (2013) and Kermer (2016) actually missed: the lack of authentic discourse.

The next considerable factor is the way the meaning of grammatical items are illustrated through diagrams and movie clips, i.e. symbolization of grammar (Holme, 2009). The symbols managed to demonstrate the notion of flashback event and viewing point when they were chained into a real and authentic context. This was even further supported by the teacher's explicit elaboration of these grammar representations.

The last component whose effect is not negligible is the utilization of meaningful and interactive CG-based tasks integrated with explicit explanation from the teacher as Norris & Ortega (2000) have suggested. Both tasks, i.e. interpretation task and text editing, played different roles in shaping students' understanding of the tenses. Whilst the interpretation task—which is basically an input-based task—successfully guides students in exploring the contextual relation of the two tenses, the collaborative output task spurs students to produce the target items along with their partners. This exemplary application of Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) which amalgamates both tasks and explicit information is evidently beneficial, confirming the study of Li, Ellis & Zhu (2016).

Conclusion

Cognitive Grammar is known to be recently thriving and carries over its capacity to aid grammar learning in EFL setting. The present study has been able to show how CG-based materials and instructions can be of substantial assistance for students in understanding the concept of tense and aspect, notably the use of past perfect and past simple. What is more, not only has CG contributed much to students' controlled production skill at isolated sentential level, but it has also been proven to be helpful to enhance their controlled as well as free production in a more contextual setting, i.e. narrative discourse. It is evident that CG, whose nature tends to be theoretical, can actually be adapted into EFL classroom practices appropriately and effectively without burdening students with too many technical jargons.

With such benefits, it is expected that both EFL teachers and students will benefit from applying CG in their classroom. Teachers are equipped with a more contextual, authentic and cognitively accessible perspective of CG when they are about to teach the tenses, and students are likewise to reap benefits in such a way that they receive a more complete description of the tenses that helps them use those target forms in a wider context. Aside from pedagogical merits, CG offers a rich and insightful research field as its potential has not been much explored in Indonesian EFL contexts, let alone its applicability for teaching tense and aspect. Eventually, it is not exaggerating to state that it is about time that CG deserves its stage in EFL grammar teaching.

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