

## *Linguistics and L1 Transfer in the Service of Pre-Service L2 Student Teachers*

Talia Rubovitz-Mann, Hemdat Hadarom Academic College, Israel

The European Conference on Language Learning 2014  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I will establish the unique contribution of integrating two major perspectives into Foreign Language (FL) teacher education, particularly to Student Teachers (STs) who are training to teach a FL that is not their native language. The first is based on insights from modern linguistics; the second adopts the concept of first language transfer as a high-order learning skill.

Based on my experience as a linguist and an English teacher educator, I will show how such an approach develops students' meta-linguistic awareness – of the grammatical differences between the FL and their mother tongue, and of the resulting difficulties and errors. It will be suggested that this approach provides the STs with a thorough understanding of the dynamics of the FL, which makes up for the lack of native speaker intuitions and even establishes a meaningful bond between the ST's and the FL that they are training to teach. Not only does this awareness minimize common language errors among English STs and improve their production and comprehension of English, but it also equips them with effective tools for teaching their future EFL students at school.

Various types of common errors in English – mainly errors related to word classes and tense and aspect – will be analyzed, and their sources will be identified and explained. Through the discussion of these common errors, it will be demonstrated how the perspective proposed here provides an insightful approach to meaningful and effective language education.

Keywords: Foreign Language Education; First Language Transfer; Meta-Linguistic Awareness

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

English teacher educators often face the significant challenge of finding the optimal balance between improving the English proficiency of their student teachers whose mother tongue is not English, and – at the same time - training them to be foreign language teachers themselves.

I will establish in this paper the unique contribution of integrating two major perspectives into Foreign Language (FL) teacher education, particularly in cases where Student Teachers (STs) whose mother tongue is Hebrew are training to teach English as a Foreign Language. The first perspective is based on insights from modern 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics; the second adopts the concept of first language (L1) transfer as a high-order thinking skill, in accordance with recent research and theories of second language acquisition (e.g. Ellis 1994 and references therein, Ellis 2006)), combined with error analysis and contrastive analysis.

After establishing the difference between second and foreign language acquisition and the significance of meta-linguistic awareness, various types of common errors in English – mainly in the domain of word classes and tenses – will be analyzed, and their sources will be identified and explained. These errors highlight some areas of importance in English teaching which are somewhat disregarded in elementary and secondary education and therefore cause difficulties with language production and comprehension at the tertiary level (Levenston 1970; Rosenstein; 1993, Swan 2010). The approach that I will outline here equips English student teachers with useful insights and tools for their future practice as English teachers back at the schools. It will be demonstrated throughout the paper how the approach proposed here contributes to meaningful and effective language education at all levels.

## **Meta-linguistic Awareness**

One of the most important factors that should be born in mind is that many English learners at all levels, throughout the world, are mostly learners of English as a foreign language, rather than as a second language. What is often referred to as second language learners are learners who are naturally exposed to a second language on a regular basis, and can thus subconsciously infer the regularities of the new language and internalize them, on the basis of many recurring examples of sentence patterns and word forms. This is similar, in some respects, to the way children acquire their mother tongue. Foreign language learners, on the other hand, are usually not sufficiently exposed to the target language, and their only exposure to the language might be in the English classroom. These learners therefore need more explicit guidelines, which should be based on the development of meta-linguistic awareness among language teachers, and, eventually, among language learners themselves. Unfortunately, these needs are often over-looked or underestimated in the standard practice of English teaching at school.

The acknowledgment of these unique needs of the EFL learner necessarily requires the development of the following types of meta-linguistic awareness:

Awareness of the differences between the learners' mother tongue and the foreign language, and of the effects of these differences, particularly common errors and difficulties; in other words: awareness of L1 transfer, of the factors affecting language transfer, and of the potential consequences of transfer.

Awareness of linguistically valid generalizations underlying basic grammatical rules and categories.

On the basis of many years of experience teaching English grammar, linguistics and language proficiency courses to EFL learners in tertiary education, I will provide examples of common errors that EFL learners make in English, and will present my approach to EFL teaching, which specifically addresses these errors. In this paper, I will focus on two main areas: lexical categories and the tense system.

### Lexical Categories

Consider the bold nonsense words in the following sentences (Adapted from Radford 1988):

1. *Jill **glonks** every morning, but right now she is not **glonking**.*
2. ***Tronks** are very cheap these days, so I bought a beautiful **tronk** last week.*
3. *He is a **nurgy** boy. He often speaks **nurgily**.*

Although there is no way to rely on the meaning in such cases of nonsense words, speakers and learners quite easily determine the grammatical categories of such nonsense words. Hence, it is evident that speakers have subconscious intuitions regarding the structural (syntactic and morphological) properties of words belonging to a given word class, as suggested by modern mentalist linguistics. One of the basic insights of modern linguistics is that there is no one-to-one mapping between linguistic forms and their meanings. More specifically, it is argued that linguistic categories on different language levels (such as tenses, word classes, sentence parts, sentence types) should be defined on the basis of their structural-grammatical properties, rather than on the basis of what they normally (or often) mean. Accordingly, modern linguistics bases lexical classifications to nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. on this structural approach. In what follows, it will be demonstrated how this insight is highly relevant to language teaching.

Let us consider first a problem whose effects are often evident in students' errors, mainly in production but also in comprehension. Sometimes, the same "meaning" is expressed differently in different languages in the sense that it is classified as belonging to different grammatical categories. I would like to propose, then, that the source of the extremely common errors among English learners at all levels – exemplified in the ungrammatical (\*) examples in (4)-(7) below – is the differences between English and certain other languages in the grammatical classification of words and expressions that are perceived as equivalent in meaning.

4. *\* It's depend on the weather; \*It's belong to me; \* It's mean that it's important.*

It can very easily be demonstrated why *depend*, *belong* and *mean* are verbs in the full sense of the term in English, as they display typical verb inflections (e.g. *depends*, *belonged*, *will mean*), whereas in Hebrew and other languages they are not. For

example, the expression corresponding to *depend* is an adjective in Hebrew, so Hebrew speakers tend to transfer this classification from their mother tongue, and impose an adjective behavior on English *depend* when they use it. Hence the common mistake *it's depend*. (Cf.: *It's beautiful; It's important; It's necessary*).

In the same way, the mistake in (2) reflects differences between English and Hebrew in how the concept of being late is codified grammatically – as an adjective in English and as a verb in Hebrew:

5. \**They late to school every day.*

Some additional types of common mistakes that English learners make similarly bear on the relevance of a structural classification of words into categories.

6. \**The cat was died.*

Unlike English, which distinguishes between the verb *to die* and the adjective *dead*, Hebrew and other languages use the same form as an adjective and as a verb, so this distinction is hard for learners to acquire and they sometimes use incorrect structures like (6), which reflect the confusion between verb and adjective forms.

7. \* *The girls are beautifuls; \* She call me every morning;*

English teachers are familiar with those mistakes in production among their students, which display over-use and avoidance of the suffix *-s*, respectively (Ellis 1994). I would like to suggest that if the plural rule is not presented explicitly, right from the start, as a rule that pertains only to the category of nouns in English, learners find it very hard to associate the *-s* with singular verbs. Therefore, if their mother tongue uses plural forms for verbs, adjectives etc., learners (especially beginners) tend to add the plural suffix *-s* to adjectives as in (7), or to verbs, e.g. \* *They goes*. Moreover, even relatively advanced learners often fail to use it with third person singular verbs, especially given the arbitrary and exceptional nature of this rule. Beginners sometimes even interpret words *like smiles, works, walks*, as plural forms of verbs or nouns, and may consequently lose completely the correct sentence structure. EFL teachers must therefore explicitly discuss the difference between English and other languages in this respect, if their students are native speakers of languages like French, Spanish, Arabic, because speakers of those languages take it for granted that every category – nouns, verb, adjectives – has plural forms. The linguistic generalization that in English, only nouns have grammatically plural forms should be highlighted, and it should be stressed that the suffix *-s* in English is NOT automatically plural.

8. \* *The government announced that she will change her policy.*

This is a common type of error among English learners whose native language (e.g. French, Spanish, Hebrew), marks noun with grammatical gender. It should be explicitly taught that English does not have grammatical gender at all, and the pronouns *he* and *she* for example, or words like *actor-actress, prince-princess* are chosen according to biological gender only (Levenston 1970). This difference between English and many other languages in whether there is grammatical gender is not standardly presented in primary or secondary education, and presenting *it*, for

example, as analogous to impersonal pronouns in other languages (e.g. "ça" in French), is sometimes misleading; more emphasis should be put on explaining the differences between English and the students' mother tongue regarding gender, so as to raise their awareness of it.

As we can see, the difference between languages is not just in the way they "choose" to classify words into classes, but also in the categories that they choose – if at all - to mark grammatically as singular-plural, masculine and feminine, etc. Language teachers should therefore be aware of these differences between the foreign language that they teach and the mother tongue of their students.

The following examples focus mainly on comprehension, but their analysis is based on the same kind of insights presented above:

9. *Careful planning can save students from financial straits.*  
(Retrieved from [www.southwesterncollegesun.com](http://www.southwesterncollegesun.com))
10. ... *a clear understanding of the interaction is essential for properly designing the part.*  
(Retrieved from:  
<http://www.freetutes.com/systemanalysis/sa2-design-of-system.html>)

Clearly, to be able to parse and comprehend even these relatively simple sentences, learners must be made aware of the syntactic structure of the NP which constitutes the subject of the sentence. More specifically, if learners understand that *planning* and *understanding* are used as nouns here because of their combination with a preceding adjective (or article+adjective), then they are not going to be misled by their apparent verb morphology. It goes without saying that if learners interpret these words as the verbs of the sentences, they will find it very hard to comprehend it, and are even likely to misunderstand it in certain cases. Note that the analysis proposed here is necessarily based on understanding what an adjective is and what an article (or, more generally, what a determiner) is. This, in turn, should also be based on structural criteria, because explaining, for example, that adjectives modify nouns without making reference to syntactic and morphological criteria will fail to explain the difference between pre-head modifiers NP's (typically adjectives, but also nouns as in *information center, committee members, psychology student*, etc.) and post-head modifiers such as PP's (*a teacher of English*) and relative clauses (*the theory that he developed*). Note that in many languages, including Hebrew, all noun modifiers always follow the head noun in NP's, so that speakers of those languages will have to acquire a new distinction that does not exist in their mother tongue, between pre- and post-head modifiers, according to the grammatical categories of the modifying phrases. It has been established in the SLA literature that new distinctions in a foreign language, i.e. cases in which one category or rule splits into two or more categories in L2, are the most difficult to acquire (e.g. Ellis 1994 and references therein). The distinction between what has to be a pre- or post-head modifier is structural by definition, and is essential for understanding that *psychology students*, for instance, means "students who study psychology", and not "the psychology of students".

The comprehension of the following examples should similarly be based on structural criteria:

11. *Captive whale and dolphin shows are not education, or conservation.*  
(Retrieved from: <http://us.whales.org/issues/captivity>)

Learners should be made aware of the fact that words in English can often belong to more than one lexical category, particularly to the noun and verb categories. This is essential for the comprehension of example (11), in which *shows* functions as the plural head of the subject NP, rather than as a third person singular form of the verb *show* in the present simple – as learners are likely to assume.

### **Tense and Aspect**

Another domain in which it is evident that there is no one straightforward mapping between meanings and grammatical forms is the tense system. Specifically, grammatical tenses do not necessarily match unique time references, as demonstrated in the following examples, in which the expressions in bold do not match the "default" time references associated with the underlined verbal expressions:

12. *She is leaving **tomorrow**.*  
13. *The train leaves at 8:00 **tonight**.*  
14. *If she comes here **tomorrow**, I will tell her the news.*  
15. *When she gets up, she **will call** you.*  
16. *If you were here with us **now**, you would enjoy the party so much!*

It is evident that clearer distinctions between concepts (tense-time), and between universal categories and their grammatical codifications in different languages are required for valid and insightful language education. English teachers, including English teacher educators, invest considerable time and energy in teaching grammatical tenses, and are, more often than not, disappointed with the results. For example, regardless of how many times the present simple and present progressive are taught and re-taught, still, students often end up not knowing how to use them correctly in natural communication when they graduate high-school. And this difficulty exists even among English student teachers and other relatively advanced learners.

I would like to suggest that the problem results partly from the mere exaggeration in the number of tenses in a foreign language, which is often evident in grammar textbooks and can itself constitute a significant psychological barrier for the average foreign-language learner, thus complicating the process of tense acquisition. As illustrated in the following table, it is often shown in grammar textbooks that English has 12 tenses; some textbooks add the so-called "future-past" (*would* forms), which brings us to 16 tenses in English!

## The 12 Verb Tenses

	Past	Present	Future
Simple	I <i>ate</i> pizza yesterday.  S + V <sub>2</sub> + O	I <i>eat</i> pizza everyday.  S + V <sub>1</sub> + O	I <i>will eat</i> pizza tomorrow.  S + 'will' + V + O
Continuous	I <i>was eating</i> pizza when you arrived.  S + 'was/were' + (V+ing) + O	I <i>am eating</i> pizza right now.  S + 'am/is/are' + (V+ing) + O	I <i>will be eating</i> pizza when you arrive.  S + 'will be' + (V+ing) + O
Perfect	I <i>had eaten</i> all of the pizza when you arrived.  S + 'had' + V <sub>3</sub> + O	I <i>have eaten</i> all of the pizza.  S + 'have/has' + V <sub>3</sub> + O	I <i>will have eaten</i> all of the pizza by the time you arrive.  S + 'will have' + V <sub>3</sub> + O
Perfect Continuous	I <i>had been eating</i> pizza for 2 hours when you arrived.  S + 'had been' + (V+ing) + O	I <i>have been eating</i> pizza for 2 hours.  S + 'have/has been' + (V+ing) + O	I <i>will have been eating</i> pizza for 2 hours when you arrive.  S + 'will have been' + (V+ing) + O

**Legend:** S = Subject    O = Object    V = Verb (V<sub>1</sub> = present / V<sub>2</sub> = past / V<sub>3</sub> = past participle)

Figure 1: The 12 Verb Tenses

Retrieved from: <http://www.easypacelearning.com/images/verbtenses.jpg>

One principle that can play a crucial role in minimizing this psychological barrier and facilitate the acquisition process is making a clear distinction between TIME, TENSE, and ASPECT. TIME as a universal cognitive concept, is normally perceived as divided into past, present and future. But, crucially, not every language codifies this distinction via grammatical distinctions between verb forms, i.e. not every language has past, present, and future verb forms (Ziv & Rubovitz-Mann 2008). Furthermore, there are languages like English, in which there are additional distinctions codified by different verb forms, such as the perfect and progressive forms. These should NOT be regarded as distinct tenses, but rather as grammatical ways to highlight some additional information or ASPECT of the action denoted by the verb. And these are, indeed, referred to in the linguistic literature as GRAMMATICAL ASPECT. Crucially these aspect distinctions apply to different tenses in very similar ways (e.g. the present progressive and the past progressive). By examining some very common mistakes that English learners often make in tenses, I will show in what follows how adopting the view that I have just outlined helps eliminate, or at least minimize, those mistakes.

**Present simple and present progressive:** Language teachers often come across mistakes like: *I eat pizza now/I'm eating pizza every day*, among others. I would like to suggest that one of the sources of these common problems is that the distinction between English and other languages (i.e. the students' mother tongue) with respect to the present simple and progressive is sometimes over-stressed. Indeed, many languages do not have present simple and present progressive verb forms, but they do have ways to express this distinction, for example by using different time expression

(Ziv & Rubovitz-Mann 2008). If we tell our students – as I do in my grammar classes – that in order to know which of the two forms is appropriate in a specific case they just have to think of an appropriate time expression in their mother tongue, even the progressive/simple distinction becomes simpler. They have to ask themselves whether what is described by the sentence is true about now (in the broad sense), or is it generally true, in some sense. If we present to them the fact that English and their mother tongue simply have different ways to express or codify the same distinctions, the distinction between simple and progressive forms becomes more accessible to them. I would like to point out, in this context, that it is important not to over-emphasize the idea that the present progressive is used in order to describe things that are being done at this very moment. After all, how often do we describe to people what we, or somebody else, are doing right now? (???*I'm talking to you right now*). The essence of the distinction between present simple and progressive is the distinction between things that are true in general, and things that are not.

**The future:** It is common practice to present the *will+VERB* structure as the most basic future form of English, and it is often presented in grammar textbooks as "the future simple" (as shown on the table above). But, from a linguistic perspective, there is no future tense in English, because there is no future morphological verb form – as there is in other languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, French, Spanish, Italian and many others. In fact, as we can see in the following examples, there are various ways to talk about future time in English – none of which makes use of a form of verb that is future grammatically/morphologically:

17. *I will open the door.*
18. *Be careful – it's going to fall.*
19. *She is leaving tomorrow.*
20. *The bus leaves at 8:00 tonight.*

Crucially, the different ways to talk about the future in English are not always equivalent to one another, and are very often not interchangeable, as evident in the following examples, which are likely to be inappropriate in most contexts:

21. *???Be careful – it will fall!*
22. *??? I leave tomorrow.*
- 23.. *??? I will buy a new car next week.*

But notice that the idea that different tenses can be used in reference to the future is not necessarily strange to speakers of other languages such as Hebrew or French, in which it is common to use present forms to talk about the future, and these are sometimes even more natural than using the future tense. In light of this, it is not difficult to explain to students that English does not have future verb forms, and it uses a variety of other forms, mostly present forms, to express reference to the future. This is how I teach "future" in my grammar courses, and the students accept it easily and naturally. Thus, making reference not only to differences, but also to similarities between languages, is sometimes enlightening and effective. Furthermore, this phenomenon demonstrates again the idea that languages differ in which categories they choose to codify grammatically (as shown above with respect to gender, for example), and this fact should be explicitly acknowledged by language teachers.

The problem is that if we consider *will*-structures as the basic future form, how can we account for the so many cases in which it is inappropriate to use *will* in talking about the future, as shown in the following examples?

24. \* *If it will rain tomorrow, we will cancel the trip.*
25. \* *When she will come home, I will tell her the news.*

The grammatical rules underlying the ungrammatical cases in (24)-(25) must be memorized as exceptions unless it is explicitly shown to English learners that there is no future tense in English, and that *will*-forms are just one among other forms that can be used to refer to the future. In fact, taking a linguistic perspective, *will* is grammatically a modal like any other modal, and the only difference is that it may be the most commonly used in reference to the future – probably due to its relatively neutral meaning. But it is clearly not the only modal that refers to the future, as we can see in examples (26)-(29):

26. *I can help you tomorrow.*
27. *You should speak to him this evening.*
28. *She must call her teacher tomorrow morning.*
29. *I might join you.*

Note that classifying *will* as a modal is not a natural classification if we define the class of modals semantically rather than grammatically, but this is how it should be classified if we take a linguistic, structural perspective.

It is always difficult for English learners to use correctly conditional sentences and sentences containing time expressions which do not allow the use of *will* or *would* (Cf. examples (24)-(25) above). This resistance to use the correct English form is very natural, considering the fact that it is highly counter-intuitive to refer to the future and not to be allowed to use what is considered a future form (*will*), especially if the learner's mother tongue does not impose a corresponding restriction. But if, right from the start, learners are taught that English does not have a future tense anyway, it becomes more natural to have to choose the right form among different present forms. And, as stressed above, learners should just be made aware of the fact that using present forms to refer to the future might be highly natural and common in their mother tongue too.

## **Conclusion**

It is acknowledged in the Second Language Acquisition theory and research that learners' mother tongue, and other languages that they know, affect second language acquisition (in production as well as in comprehension) in intricate ways, and interact with a variety of other factors (Ellis 1994, and references therein). Empirical evidence shows that it is not necessarily the case that learners simply translate or transfer forms from their native language to the foreign language in a one-to-one manner, as it was originally assumed by the Behaviorists in mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century. Still first language transfer exists, and is evident in every aspect of language; and sometimes there is more to first language transfer than meets the eye. In this paper, I have focused on a very small sample of simple and basic English grammatical issues; there are more cases and language areas which, according to my experience, benefit from the kind of

treatment that I have proposed here (e.g. additional tense forms, modals, passive, verb BE), but a detailed discussion of these cases is beyond the scope of this paper. Transfer effects are also evident in other aspects of sentence structure, and in completely different aspects of language, such as vocabulary and phonology. In what follows, I will only give some very simple and brief examples. In vocabulary, the respective distinctions in English – but not in every language – between *clock* and *watch*, *hand* and *arm*, *foot* and *leg*, *work*, *job* and *paper*, *table* and *desk*, etc. are responsible for vocabulary mistakes that English learners often make. The same is true for prepositions, in which there are more distinctions in English than there are in Hebrew and in other languages, as in *at 8 o'clock* vs. *on Monday* vs. *in March*; *I'm going to school* vs. *it's difficult for me*. Indeed, as noted above, the most difficult for foreign language learners is to acquire new distinctions or categories that do not exist in their mother tongue. These differences should be presented explicitly and accurately to EFL learners at the stage when they start acquiring English vocabulary.

Furthermore, foreign language teachers are all familiar with pronunciation problems, many of which resulting from the fact that different languages do not make the same phonological distinctions, e.g. distinctions between different vowel sounds. Many English learners not only cannot produce the different sounds, but also cannot even hear the difference between them! Therefore, as I have suggested in this paper, the key to dealing with these problems is raising meta-linguistic awareness.

Given that mother-tongue effects are inevitable, I am proposing to adopt the strategy of “if you can't beat them (i.e. first language effects), join them!” I know from my experience that identifying and defining the source of the problem, and being aware of it, are crucial to a more effective acquisition process. Linguistic differences between a foreign language and the learners' mother tongue, on every language level, and the effects of these differences on learners' language, should be explicitly addressed and discussed. The key word here is **awareness**, language awareness, and what I have shown in this paper can be implemented in every aspect of language. I am not pretending that all errors will be eliminated by adopting the perspective I have outlined here. Indeed, many aspects of language are completely arbitrary (e.g. prepositions), and their acquisition will not benefit directly from adopting a linguistic perspective nor by developing meta-linguistic awareness. But the point is that simplifications – which we always, naturally, look for when it comes to teaching – sometimes turn out to be over-simplistic, even misleading, and may result in misconceptions about the correct rules of the language in the long run. They might achieve little beyond correcting a specific mistake in an ad hoc manner, and miss the valid generalization underlying the rule.

And that is why EFL teachers and student teachers should be made aware of important differences between the learners' mother tongue and English, and of certain relevant structural regularities and linguistic generalizations. After all, at some point, pre-service student teachers will have to explain these rules to their students at primary and secondary schools who have to learn English as a foreign language. Their students will probably face the same difficulties that many of their teachers have faced when they were students, if their teachers have acquired English as a foreign language themselves, or difficulties that teachers might not be familiar with if they are native speakers of English. Interestingly, student teachers who are native speakers of English are often particularly eager to learn those grammatical rules, as they feel that

their native speaker intuitions do not provide them with sufficient tools for teaching the language as a foreign language, nor would they know what the sources of their students' difficulties are. I even dare say that if student teachers are more knowledgeable about the nature and intricacies of language, they might be better teachers, at least in the sense that their students at school would eventually be able to use English more accurately.

It is well known that not everybody understands grammatical (or linguistic) rules, certainly not everybody likes them, but I strongly believe that English teachers should be made aware of them, for their own benefit, and certainly for the benefit of their students.

## References

- Ellis, N. (2006). Cognitive perspectives on SLA. The Associative-Cognitive CREED. *AILA Review*, 19, 100-121.
- Ellis, R. (1994) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford UP
- Levenston, E. A. (1970). *English for Israelis. A guide for teachers*. Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press.
- Rosenstein, D. (1993). *Ta'ita? Tikanta!* Raanana: Eric Cohen Books.
- Swan, M. (2010) *Practical English usage* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Oxford UP
- Ziv, Y. & Rubovitz-Mann, T. (2008). Hotting about HOTS in language teaching. Paper presented at the Annual Study Day of the Mofet English Forum, Tel Aviv, Israel.

**Contact email:** talimann1@013net.net