



Sorbonne
Nouvelle



(Make it make sense) REDUX

**Insights from Applied (Cognitive) Linguistics research to
improve grammar teaching**

NATO BILC Professional Development Seminar 2024 – Prague

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This is a workshop, **NOT** a lecture

What can **YOU EXPECT** from this workshop?

1. Evidence-based information about teaching grammar.
2. Hands-on activities.
3. Food for thought and food for action.

What is **EXPECTED FROM YOU?**

1. Active and constructive participation.
2. Bring your experience and knowledge.
3. Be open to alternative ways of thinking/doing.



Outline

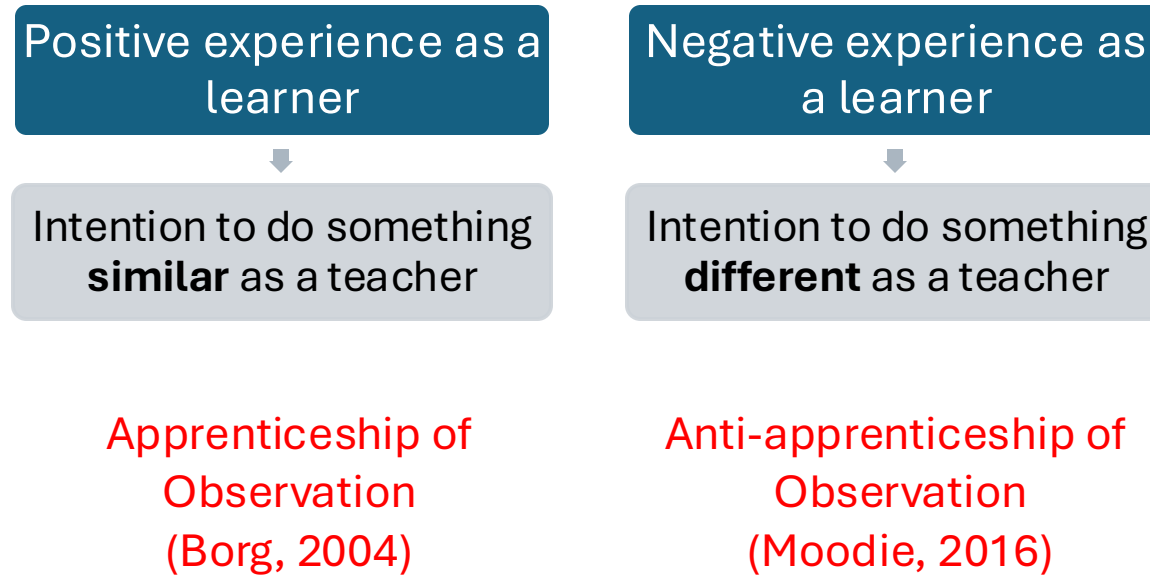


FOLLOW ME

1. The Matrix has you (irregular verbs)
2. Focus on regularities, not idiosyncrasies (passives)
3. Teach the concept, not just the form (The Count/Mass Distinction)
4. Concluding remarks
5. Questions / Feedback

The Matrix has you. .

All teachers have been learners at some point. As such, they tend to be influenced positively or negatively by their experience as learners.



You may not be as creative as you think

We need to talk about irregular verbs...

How many irregular verbs are there in English?

Around 160 depending on how you consider derivations (wake / awake) and other quirky verbs (bereft) for instance

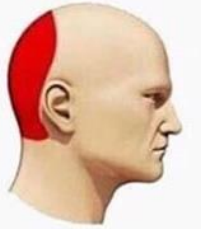
(Grabowski & Mindt, 1995)

Types of Headaches

Migraine



Hypertension



Stress



**irregular
verbs**



We need to talk about irregular verbs...

How are irregular verbs usually presented?

Alphabetical list?

List that groups them by vowel change?

A song (<https://youtu.be/gZzKe1BC2XU?si=EBNZ3BsqxqgcZKnC>)



If we can group / classify irregular verbs, perhaps we should rethink just how irregular these verbs really are...

TASK 1 (pairwork)

Can we
adopt a more
principled
approach to
selecting
« irregular »
verbs?

LOOK at the corpus-based learning list of irregular verbs in your handout and **ANSWER** the following questions:

- **How** is the list arranged?
- Decide **which verbs** to teach / assign based on the list?

Duration: 5 minutes

Discussion: 5 minutes



Use the glossary

Insights from the frequency list of irregular verbs



Balancing teaching time and learning outcomes?

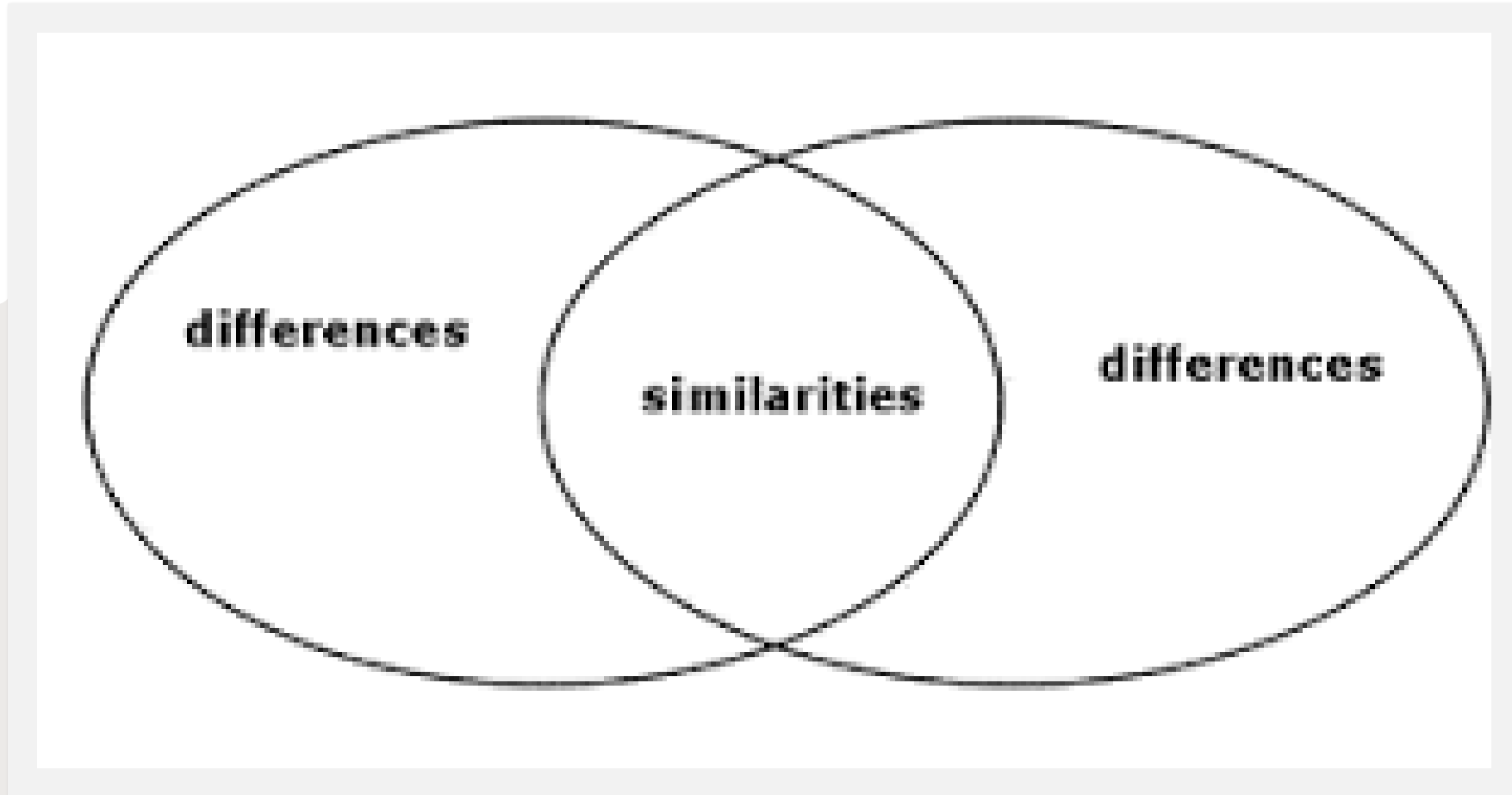
- Cumulative frequency = prioritizing the verbs that most impact proficiency.
- Not wasting time on aspects of the language that are less useful = increased engagement

Another principled list

- The three **main forms** (including spelling variations when applicable).
- Classification by **CEFR level**.
- **Frequency** information (based on the British National Corpus).
- Classification by **pronunciation** (based on Quirk).
- **Contextualized** examples for each form.
- Fully **searchable**.

<u>Base</u>	<u>Past</u>	<u>PP</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>Cl</u>
<u>be</u>	<u>was / were</u>	<u>been</u>	A1	1	
<u>begin</u>	<u>began</u>	<u>begun</u>	A1	1	7A
<u>buy</u>	<u>bought</u>	<u>bought</u>	A1	1	3B
<u>catch</u>	<u>caught</u>	<u>caught</u>	A1	1	3B
<u>choose</u>	<u>chose</u>	<u>chosen</u>	A1	1	4Aa
<u>come</u>	<u>came</u>	<u>come</u>	A1	1	7B
<u>do</u>	<u>did</u>	<u>done</u>	A1	1	4Cc

<https://www.writing.support/irregular-verbs.htm>



Focus on regularities, not idiosyncrasies

WHAT do we teach when we teach?



Textbooks are central in language teaching

“coursebooks remain the **default language learning resource**, and [...] teachers and learners world-wide need, want and value them as ready-made language teaching materials” (Mishan, 2021, p.1)

The operating word here is “ready-made”, which means the **users may take the linguistic descriptions that are provided at face value.**

If textbooks sell well, it must mean they somehow meet customer needs although it is more likely the case, Tomlinson (2001, p.7) remarks, that the **textbooks** themselves have served **as models for teachers’ and learners’ expectations.**

Textbooks have become a **de facto syllabus** for many (Harwood, 2004)

Some problems with textbooks

> **surface diversity vs. deeper homogeneity.**

Cue the **The ELT canon of grammatical structures** > “the commonly agreed upon totality, or catalogue, of grammar terms used to teach EFL” (Burton, 2019, p. 3).

> **Teaching vs. Learning**

“Grammar McNuggets” (Thornbury, 2010, n.p.): input is “artificially packaged into bite-sized chunks for the purpose of teaching”

#IntellectualComfortFood



I don't judge people based on
race, creed, colour or gender.

I judge people based on
spelling, grammar,
punctuation and
sentence structure.





Our insistence on learners grappling with such grammatical rules may be pointless considering they are often **inherently flawed**.

Let me show you.

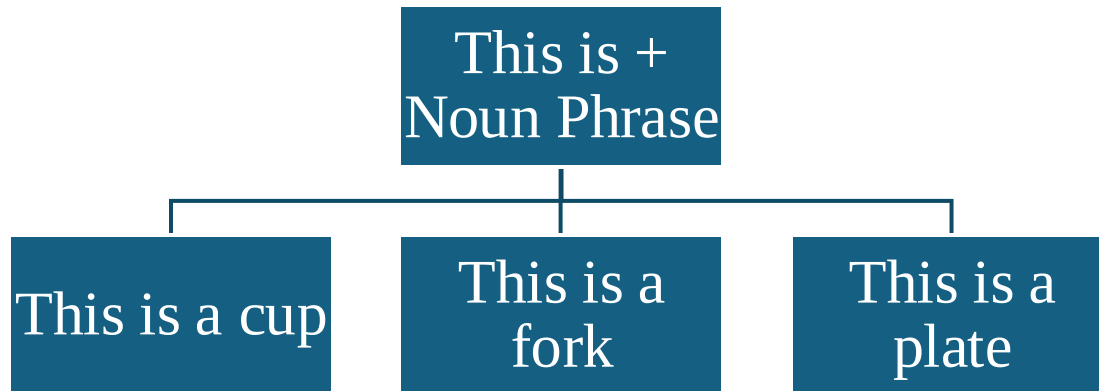
Conceptual framework

Language is usage-based, i.e., the primary source for both first (L1) and second language (L2) learning is the learner's participative, contextualized experience of language.

The cognitive mechanisms that learners employ in language learning are not exclusive to language learning, but are general cognitive mechanisms associated with learning of any kind.

(Ellis and Wulff, 2019)

Key cognitive mechanisms in language acquisition (1)



Intention reading refers to the child's ability to attribute communicative intentions to others and mimic such interactions.

The child is also capable of processing the information it receives. It recognize and processes regularities, and thereby anticipates subsequent language use. This is called **pattern finding**.

(Tomasello, 2003, 2009)

Key cognitive mechanisms in language acquisition (2)



(il)legitimate concerns about Large Language Models.

A recent study found that language models can learn to distinguish between different communicative intentions, even when these intentions are conveyed through subtle linguistic cues.

> AI-powered tools are also providing “computational evidence for the cognitive plausibility of theories from usage-based language acquisition, in particular intention reading and pattern finding”

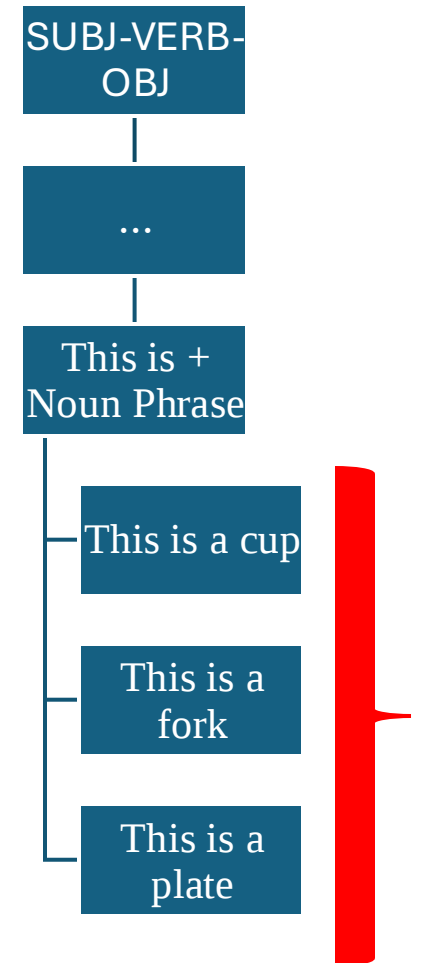
(Nevens et al., 2022, p.23)

Pedagogical implications of « pattern finding »

If learners make generalizations on the basis of concrete instantiations, language structure is best taught / learnt through exposure to **high-frequency tokens** (such as *this is a cup*) **rather than types** (i.e., abstract generalizations such as *This is + Noun Phrase*).

“where linguistic form lacks perceptual salience and so goes unnoticed by learners [...] additional attention is necessary in order for the relevant associations to be learned”

(Ellis & Wulff, 2015, p. 89)



Patterns,
patterns,
patterns!

TASK 2 (group work)

LOOK at the screenshots from English Grammar Profile Online and **ANSWER** the following question:

Can you find patterns in the list of examples?

Duration: 5 minutes

Discussion: 5 minutes

Patterns involving passive constructions at CEFR levels A1/A2 (English Grammar Profile Online)

Tokens (It is called / It was made by)

Types (IT IS / WAS + Past Participle + BY-Person / OF-NOUN).

Research vs. Teaching

Techniques are **NOT** methods

Techniques = specific actions

Methods = “a coherent set of links between actions and thoughts in language teaching”

(Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 1)

Corpus data can inform language teaching on *what* to teach, but not on *how* to teach.

(Whong, 2022)



Putting theory into practice

TASK 3 (pairwork)

How would you use the corpus findings we have just discussed in a lesson plan?

Focus on the the following aspects:

- Type of input: what would you use to support teaching and learning? (text, video, objects, etc.)
- Task type: what would you want the learners to be able to do at the end of your lesson?

You don't need to think everything through!

Duration: 5 minutes

Discussion: 10 minutes



**WHAT WOULD
CHATGPT
SAY?**

Type of input

Give students a variety of **clothing labels or product packaging**. In pairs, ask them to look for phrases that describe the material an item is made of (e.g., "*Made of cotton*") or the location where it was produced (e.g., "*Made in China*").

Example Sentences:

- *This shirt is made of cotton.*
- *The toy is made in China.*

Task type

In small groups, students **create a short, descriptive story about an object or product** (e.g., a piece of clothing, a toy, or a gadget). The story must use **at least 3 sentences** with "made of" and "made in."

Example prompts:

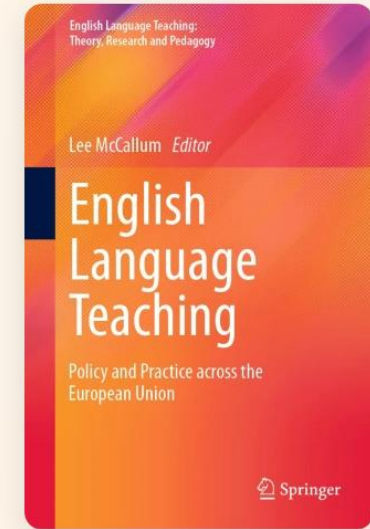
- *Tell the story of how a famous product was made.*
- *Describe an object from home and where it was made.*



Teaching Form in the Action-Oriented Classroom: Can-Do!

Chapter | First Online: 12 August 2022

pp 257–273 | [Cite this chapter](#)



What I had to say
in 2022...

A simple task for this purpose might consist in looking at labels on clothes to elicit the construction “it is made of...” and “it is made by ...”, and then move on to other, perhaps more abstract instances of that construction using a question such as “What is ... made of?” / “Who is it made by?” as in “it is made of wool” and “it is made by H&M”. An even more fine-grained understanding of the type of NOUNS that can be use in the constructions may be achieved through carefully chosen examples: it (the brick) is made of clay vs. it (the house) is made of bricks. The use of the meta-language such as *passive* or MASS / COUNT does not seem necessary at this point.

How do you teach the Count/Mass Distinction

TASK 4 (individual work/group work)

Take a few minutes to reflect on how you typically teach the Count/Mass Distinction.

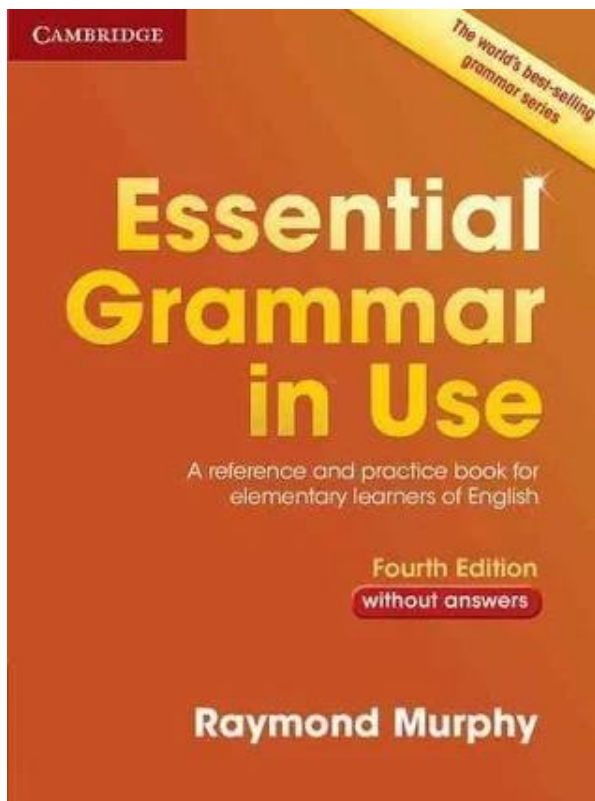
Focus on what is important for learners to know.

Duration: 5 minutes + 5 minutes

Discussion: 5 minutes



The Count/Mass Distinction



#one-fits-all (Romero Muñoz, 2012)

Some issues with EGU (and the ELT canon)

Unit
67

a bottle / some water
(countable/uncountable 1)

Are these « really » minimal pairs?

Cooccurents	LogDice
people	7.41996
time	7.07824
cases	7.98380
things	7.16876
point	7.05569
reason	7.36850
way	6.04072
work	5.76838
years	5.72580
information	5.80526
interesting	6.69505
form	6.26447
issues	6.38259
ways	6.55211
areas	6.28687
ideas	6.55550
questions	6.38920
examples	6.67379

cooccurents	LogDice
these	8.83814
those	7.71892
things	7.28290
people	6.27875
issues	7.31110
features	7.08541
questions	6.91564
friends	6.89897
problems	6.78812
members	6.42294
players	6.79799
challenges	6.93732
names	6.76590
stuff	6.72970
ideas	6.66403
songs	6.70492
companies	6.25479

Table 1. Up to 4 words after “some” in the English Web Corpus 2020

Table 10. Up to 5 words after “some of” in the English Web Corpus 2020

Some (more) issues with EGU (and the ELT canon)

Focus on symptomatic rather than constitutive aspects of the CMD (Drożdż, 2017).

Learners will almost exclusively attend to surface-level phenomena such as pluralization and quantifiers.

You can use **one/two/three** (etc.) + *countable nouns* (you can count them):



one **bottle**



two **bottles**



three **men**



four **houses**

Countable nouns can be *singular* (= one) or *plural* (= two or more):

singular
plural

a car	the car	my car	etc.
cars	two cars	the cars	some cars many cars etc.

- ☐ I've got **a car**.
- ☐ New **cars** are very expensive.
- ☐ There aren't **many cars** in the car park.

You can't use the singular (**car/bottle/key** etc.) alone. You need **a/an**:

- ☐ We can't get into the house without **a key**. (*not* without key)

B

Uncountable nouns

For example: **water air rice salt plastic money music tennis**

water



water

salt



salt



money



music

You can't say **one/two/three** (etc.) + these things: ~~one water~~ ~~two musics~~

Uncountable nouns have only *one* form:

money the money my money some money much money etc.

- ☐ I've got **some money**.
- ☐ There isn't **much money** in the box.
- ☐ **Money** isn't everything.

You can't use **a/an** + *uncountable nouns*: ~~a money~~ ~~a music~~ ~~a water~~



Some (more) issues with EGU (and the ELT canon)

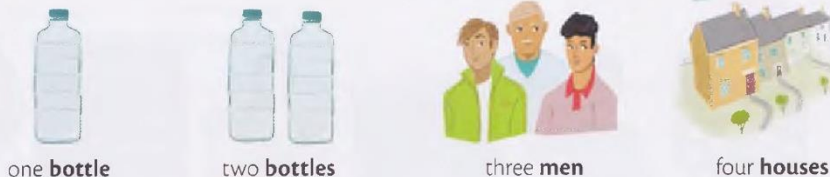
Falling into the trap of exhaustivity

Many different forms are provided:

- articles (a, an, the, and the zero article),
- possessive determiners (my),
- indefinite determiners (some, many, much),
- cardinal numbers (one, two, three, four)
- irregular plural forms (men)
- regular plural forms (-s plural)

Is all of this **ESSENTIAL** GRAMMAR?

You can use **one/two/three** (etc.) + *countable nouns* (you can count them):



Countable nouns can be *singular* (= one) or *plural* (= two or more):

singular	a car	the car	my car	etc.
plural	cars	two cars	the cars	some cars many cars etc.

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You can't use **a/an** + *uncountable nouns*: ~~a money~~ ~~a music~~ ~~a water~~

Some (more) issues with EGU (and the ELT canon)



Uncountable nouns have only *one* form:
money the **money** my **money** some **money** much **money** etc.

Learners may not view the series of noun phrases as “only one form”, but rather as a series of forms

The noun *money* is successively presented in five different combinations, namely with a zero article, a definite article, a possessive determiner, and two different indefinite determiners.

It would have been more transparent to say that “**the word does not change**”.



TINA logic in ELT

- Time constraints.
- Easy to test.
- Easy to teach.
- The power of habits.
- Everybody is doing it.
-





A crash course in Applied Cognitive Linguistics



EMBODIMENT = we think the way we do because we are the way we are.

It does not mean, however, that embodied experiences do not also rely on **some shared knowledge or experience**. There is a need for **mutual understanding and communicative intent**.



A crash course in Applied Cognitive Linguistics

IMPLICATIONS OF EMBODIMENT FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

If language is the schematization of our experience, it should be possible to use grammatical explanations and metalanguage that illustrate not only ***what language does, but also why and how.***

BY CONTRAST...

Traditional pedagogies have consistently sought to advocate the need for an **a priori grammar** and its necessary formalisms.

We should not underestimate the **descriptive purpose** that such categories have served for generations upon generations of learners and teachers.

Can we count on Applied Cognitive Linguistics to teach the Count/Mass Distinction?



Remember this:

1. Language is embodied.
2. Differences in form = differences in experience = differences in meaning
viz. the “principle of no synonymy” (Bolinger, 1968)

This entails that the CMD is best characterized not as a series of idiosyncrasies, but rather that there are **more general conceptual principles** that underlie the linguistic links and that these general conceptual principles are **experientially motivated** (Verspoor, 2014)



Some more general cognitive principles

Bounding:

Mental operation that consists in **applying boundaries** to specific viewing arrangements (see *e.g.*, Langacker, 2008)

Langacker (2008, p.31): “categorization depends on how things are conceptualized, which to some extent is independent of their objective nature”.

Compositionality:

Mental operation that consists in characterizing the **internal structure of nouns**. One of the defining features of a MASS noun is that it is **homogenous**, *i.e.*, it is “qualitatively the same throughout” (Langacker, 2008, p. 140). By contrast, a COUNT noun tends to be characterized as the sum of its parts; it is **heterogeneous**.

Some more general cognitive principles

A

Bounded or unbounded?

The speaker considers something as having boundaries. If you break it down, it is something different.



This is a broken cup!

BOUNDED

Something does not have a clear shape or boundaries.

How do you represent "tea"?



UNBOUNDED



Trojan Horse approach

➤ Use the « codes » of ELT



Beyond a binary logic

REMEMBER:

Langacker (2008, p. 31): “categorization depends on how things are conceptualized, which to some extent is independent of their objective nature” (p. 31).



There's A spider on the wall



There's gonna be spider all over the floor

B**Countable**

In English, something perceived as bounded can be counted and take the plural (+ -s).

**C****Uncountable**

*In English, something perceived as unbounded cannot be counted directly.
You need to specify the quantity.*



a bottle of water



a glass of water

*But you can say **a piece of ... / a bottle of ...** etc. + uncountable noun:*

a bottle of water
a piece of cheese
a bowl of rice

a carton of milk
a bottle of perfume
a cup of coffee

a bar of chocolate
a piece of music
a loaf of bread

A note on measure words / classifiers

REMEMBER:

Langacker (2008, p. 31): “categorization depends on how things are conceptualized, which to some extent is independent of their objective nature” (p. 31).

Kishimoto (2007)’s experiment

Have students draw prototypical COUNT and MASS nouns and compare their drawings.

Students should notice that COUNT nouns are more easily represented than MASS ones AND that MASS nouns are u



Teaching in a more conceptual way step by step

1. PROMOTE NOTICING. Show how the same situation can be construed in different ways.

There's a spider on the wall

VS.

There's gonna be spider all over the wall

Teaching in a more conceptual way step by step



2. PROMOTE EMBODIED COGNITION. Relate (and have students relate) a specific construal to sensory-motor experiences using different materials, objects, sounds, etc.

Cooking – performative action / embodied practice

A lot of **co-speech gestures** (i.e., the gestures that one makes while speaking) enhance the language input and facilitate language acquisition in the classroom (Stam & Tellier, 2021).

Teaching in a more conceptual way
step by step

3. SKEW INPUT. Provide enough meaningful, contextualized usage events + tasks requiring the use of these usage events

**CREATE THE CONDITIONS THAT
ARE NECESSARY FOR
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**



Teaching in a more conceptual way
step by step

4. FOCUS ON PROTOTYPES and PATTERNS. Help students feel what a native speaker would typically say.

There's a spider on the wall

VS.

There's gonna be spider all over the wall

Don't underestimate the power of humor / weirdness

Self-reflection is the key

TASK 5 (individual work)

What are YOUR top three takeaways from this workshop?

Think about what we could share with the participants who did not attend the workshop.

Use bullet points – no need to flesh out your ideas.

Duration: 5 minutes

Discussion: 5 minutes

My takeaways

Be aware that commercial textbooks often promote a one-fits-all approach that focuses on surface-level phenomena.

Dare to question your « intuition ».

Do not confuse content requirements (**what** to teach) with methodology (**how** to teach).

Think in terms of patterns rather than rules.

Remember that learning a language is like learning anything at all – embodiment is key.





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