TESTING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH (WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AN ELECTRONIC EDUCATION AND TESTING PROJECT AT THE TODOR KABLESHKOV HIGHER SCHOOL OF TRANSPORT, SOFIA)

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Abstract: The article treats issues related not only to different types of tests and the necessity to administer them but as well as to tests materials selection and preparation. Certain learners' grammar difficulties due to negative language transfer are also taken into consideration.
Key words: tests, contrastive analysis, error prediction, materials selection

1. Introduction

In *Introducing Applied Linguistics* Corder regards tests "as measuring instruments" as they "are designed to measure the learner's "knowledge", or "competence in" the language at a particular moment in his course …".

However, tests can be expected to supply much more information to specialists as they reveal and assess the "relationship between the teaching materials and their exploitation, and language learning." (id.)[1]

In current article author's view not only tests do reflect the extent to which selection of teaching materials, course design and teacher's methodology have been adequate and successful, but they should also result from the prediction of errors as well as of the degrees of learning and acquisition difficulty. Paper's author estimates study of learners' interlanguage[2] and contrastive analysis (CA) are really relevant for this purpose.

Although applied linguists usually discuss positive and negative transfer (interference) in terms of NL-FL correlation, I must point out that some researchers[3] do not underestimate the role of one or more previously studied FL influencing TL learning process. Paper's author supports the existence of various instances of FL1-FL2 transfer depending on various external and internal conditions. That is why current article's purpose is not only to present ideas related to tests' design and selection but also to motivate them in the perspective of errors[4] prediction based on CA. Thus, it represents a continuation of a previous paper focussing on contrastive ways

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This concept is referred to by Corder, 1983 as "transitional competence", representing learner's "underlying knowledge of the language to date".

[3] Corder 1973, p. 227; Odlin 1989, p. 27; Danchev 2001, p. 117

[4] Corder 1983, p.168 "The errors of performance will characteristically be unsystematic and the errors of competence, systematic. It will be useful therefore hereafter to refer to errors of performance as *mistakes*, reserving the term *error* to refer to the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to construct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e., his *transitional competence.*"

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[1] Corder 1973, both quotations are on pp. 351, 352.
[2] Selinker 1969, 1983 reckons "interlanguage (IL)" is the result of interaction between native language (NL) and target language (TL). In his way of thinking the more successful a language learner is, the faster his/her IL becomes closer to TL.

of teaching English preterit and perfect to influenced by French learners.[5]

2. Types of tests

Cohen[6] classifies tests according to the types of achievement they measure into the following categories:

a. *prognostic tests* including *aptitude tests* and *placement tests*

b. *evaluation of attainment tests* including *achievement tests* ("assess the student's performance in a given course ") and *general proficiency tests* ("assess a student's skill for real-life purposes ")

c. *norm-referenced* (compares "a respondent with other respondents") and *criterion-referenced* (measures "whether a respondent has met certain instructional… criteria").

According to the skills tested tests can also fall into the following categories:

d. *listening*

e. *reading*

f. *speaking*

g. *writing*[7].

According to "levels of intellectual operation" tests can check:

h. *knowledge* "(bringing to mind the appropriate material)"

i. *comprehension* "(understanding the basic meaning of the material)"

j. *application* "(applying the knowledge of the elements of language and comprehension to how they interrelate in the production of a correct oral or written message.)"

k. *analysis* "(breaking down a message into its constituent parts in order to make explicit the relationships between ideas)"

l. *synthesis* "(arranging parts so as to produce a pattern…such as in effectively organizing ideas in a written composition)"

m. *evaluation* "(making quantitative and qualitative judgments about material)".

According to "tested response behaviour" tests can check:

n. *fluency* "without concern for grammatical correctness"[8]

o. *accuracy* "phonological or grammatical correctness".

According to "characteristics of respondents" tests may be designed for:

p. *different age groups*

q. *different socioeconomic levels*

r. *different ethnic or language groups*.

According to the "item response format" tests can be classified into:

s. *fixed format* ("include true / false, multiple choice, and matching items.")

t. *structured format* ("include ordering (…respondents are requested to arrange words to make a sentence…), duplication…identification…and completion."; Cohen also includes written or oral compositions, role-playing activities.)

According to tested language elements tests can check:

u. *phonology*

v. *grammar*

w. *vocabulary*

x. *pragmatics*

y. *mechanics*

z. *stylistics*.

3. Testing materials – preparation and design (preliminaries)

Having listed various types of tests I would like to assert that tests are not only due to check in most cases already taught knowledge, thus providing both teacher and learners with valuable feed back revealing strong and weak points in teaching and studying. Tests do also represent a precious tool one can use while teaching.

In line with my studies I shall share ideas related to the use, preparation and design of grammar tests and more specifically of these ones related to teaching English preterit and perfect. Test items can be developed to suit the purposes of above-mentioned prognostic, attainment, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, fixed format and structured format testing procedures.

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[5] Ruzhekova Rogozherova 2007

[6] Cohen, A. 1979, pp. 332,333

[7] I refer Cohen's classification of skills tested, nature of items, intellectual operation, response behaviour, characteristics of respondents, item response format and tested language elements (pp. 333-337) to other types of tests. We proceed this way being convinced that all types can combine in different specific situations depending on type of achievement, skill, item, etc. which needs to be checked.

[8] However, I reckon that fluency is impossible without at least to some extent adequate grammar that does not hamper understanding. There are frequent examples proving the existence of fine but relevant to meaning and therefore obligatory to be mastered grammar hues (for example related to discriminating time-referenced perfect from preterit.)

When choosing and grading already mentioned grammar-testing items, activity in accordance with applied linguistics, we must keep in mind basic temporal and aspectual characteristics of preterit and perfect categories.

3.1. Tense and aspect in English

Tense and aspect are tightly interrelated in English and French because of their lack of special morphemes expressing separately these categories, as it is the case in Bulgarian. This cumulative essence of English tense and aspectual forms leads to the accumulation of different values and meanings in one and the same form. This fact makes investigation and description of meanings highly pragmatic or depending on all contextual and cotextual factors, including adverbs, articles, prepositions, phrasal verbs, verbs inherent meanings, etc.[9]. Thus study of *tense* or *temporality* which is *deictic* [10] (concerned with exactly positioning on the imaginary time axis the event's moment of production) in above-mentioned languages is impossible without study of *aspect* or *aspectuality* which is *descriptive* [11](concerned with revealing the situation's inner development) and vice-versa.

Hereby are briefly enumerated for the purpose of this testing-related study basic temporal and aspectual meanings of English preterit and perfect, thus motivating tests items selection and design as well as their implementation.[12]

3.2. Temporal features of English preterit used for the expression of finished non-current events

Preterit in English refers to *finished events or series of events all belonging to the past*. The lack of current relevance makes this form narrative and consequently frequently occurring with temporal indications (e.g. *yesterday, last year, at Christmas, two days ago, in 1987, during the previous century*), strictly positioning events in the past and sequencing words (e.g. *first, next, afterwards, at the end, finally*).

3.3. Aspectual features of English preterit

English preterit aspectual meanings can be subdivided into the following subcategories:
- Expressing the beginning of a process (ingressive or inceptive aspect)
- Expressing the end of a process (terminative aspect)
- Expressing punctuality (punctual aspect)
- Expressing repetitiveness (repetitive aspect)
- Expressing duration (durative aspect)
- Expressing combinations of aspectual values
- Expressing lack of perfectivity (unfinished process in the past).

3.4. Features of English perfect

Having in mind the uniqueness of English perfect tightly currently related, expressing relations rather than deicticity (although one cannot deny time references existence accompanying the perfect of persistent situation), features listed below will naturally reveal the category's aspectuality: [13]
- perfect of result
- experiential perfect
- perfect of persistent situation
- perfect of recent past

3.5. Prediction of learning and acquisition difficulties

As it was mentioned above NL as well as any other previously studied foreign language or languages may be the source of positive or negative language transfer. Current article's author agrees with Corder, stating it must not be considered that "any particular feature of the target language which differs from the mother tongue is necessarily inherently difficult to learn."[14] However, as far as difficulty in acquisition is concerned, I estimate that differences or *lack of isomorphism* in structures and their meaning may induce *errors* in some learners and, consequently believe error prediction can be really useful in teaching as well as in test materials design, making both processes more effective and linguistic awareness rising.

Here below will be presented some expected problems related to studied categories learning, thus determining *selection of test items* in accordance with already listed types of tests. In present paper author's view the more difficult a tense or aspect characteristic is the more it should be taught and, consequently tested. "Easy" features should not be underestimated either but taught, tested and consolidated before and if needed along with harder ones.

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[9] French counterparts of preterit and perfect are considered tenses in spite of French perfect's dual and extremely vivid nature characterized in my view with predominant aspectuality although the form has taken over to a great extent French preterit's deictic functions.

[10] Quirk 1985, 4.17; Comrie 1998, p. 2; Imbs 1960, p. 12

[11] Definitions of aspect - Comrie 1998, p. 3; Brinton 1988, p. 2,3; Cohen 1989, p. 16-18

[12] Aspectual meanings - Comrie 1998; Brinton 1988; Verkuyl 1972; temporal and aspectual values contrastive overview and illustrative examples – Ruzhekova Rogozherova 2007

[13] Listed classification belongs to Comrie 1998, p. 56

[14] Corder 1973, p. 230

Preterit learning hardship may predominantly arise from aspectual NL-TL or FL1-FL2 divergence due to the fact that English preterit not only expresses *finished and non-current relevant* ingressive, terminative, punctual, repetitive or durative event, events, but it can also express *imperfectivity*, along with the past continuous.

Perfect learning hardship may essentially occur while assimilating and mastering the third enumerated characteristic value – the *perfect of persistent situation*. It usually represents the most frequent source of difficulties mainly because of NL-TL or FL1-FL2 isomorphism. In NL or FL1 (French) *most often* the same value is expressed through the simple present tense.[15]

There is a third source of hardship deriving from above mentioned preterit → ← perfect aspectual connection differing from this one in FL1 (in French quite often perfect and preterit can be interchangeable, the perfect assuming two basic roles, of a partial preterit equivalent and of a typical, although not so tightly connected to the present as this is the case in English, perfect aspect).

4. Tests items – selection and design taking into account CA

Having mentioned preliminaries determining author's choice of items to be tested and the format to be used, a few exemplifying ideas will be hereby proposed.[16]

4.1. Preterit testing items [17]

A. Written, application, accuracy, structured format testing activities

I. Complete the sentences using the following verbs in the correct form: fall, hurt, sell, teach, write

1. Mozart…..more than 600 pieces of music.

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[15] Lists of French →← English preterit and perfect functional equivalents - Ruzhekova Rogozherova 2007

[16] I fully understand the fact the longer a test item is, the more relevant, representative and valid is. However, I tend to limit numbers of items presented hereby for reasons of conciseness thus proposing just ideas and hints.
While designing some of the following exercises I was inspired by ideas, exercises and texts, I transformed and adapted to my objectives, in: Murphy R.; Bonk, N., Kotij, G., Lukjanova, N.; Potalueva, A., Homutova, E.; Soars J. & L.

17 The following exercises aim not only at consolidating irregular verbs preterit forms, but also at emphasizing its typical temporal and aspectual characteristics (rf. 3.2-3.3). Ex. A. IV is specifically designed to illustrate above-mentioned NL, FL1-TL aspectual differences as far as the preterit is concerned (rf.3.5.).

2. "How did you learn to drive?" "My father ………..me."
3. We couldn't afford to keep our car, so we………it.
4. Dave …………down the stairs this morning and ………….his leg.

II. Complete the sentences. Put the verb into the correct form, positive or negative.

1. It was warm, so I …….off my coat. (take)
2. The film wasn't very good. I …………..it very much. (enjoy)
3. They decided to improve their English and………(subscribe) to an English magazine.

III. Put the words in the correct order to form sensible sentences:

1. thanked, quickly, The, young, went, man, away, and, him.
2. found, bench, under, it, I, the.
3. not, him, hear, young, did, the, But, man.
4. at, meet, our, the, Did, new, you, colleague, conference?

IV. Translate the following sentences:

1. Катрин закъсняваше, а Мартин седеше на пейката до пързалката и я чакаше.
2. Беше посинял от студа, въпреки че се опитваше да се затопли.
3. Най-после Катрин пристигна с два чифта кънки в ръце.
4. Мартин се изправи бързо и едва не се плъзна по леда; вгледа се в нея и ù се усмихна.

V. Fill in the gaps choosing most appropriate past simple verbs:

Once Galileo …………. a lot of people to the Leaning tower. From the top of the tower he ………… two stones, one large and one small. These two bodies ……… side by side and …….. the ground together. That ……. the beginning of a new era in science. The importance of Galileo's many experiments is not in the fact that they …………. the mistakes in Aristotle's reasoning, but that they ………… the world a new scientific method, the method of experimentation.

B. Written, application, accuracy, fixed format testing activities

I. Match the phrases from both columns using *and*, *so* or *because*:

a. We went to the shops   1. he ran to the station.

b. He was late for the train   2. the audience couldn't her him.

c. He spoke loudly ……………… 3. bought new shoes.

II.   Fill in the gaps with the correct verb:

a. Galileo ……… both of these questions.
b. He ……… them both, the first by measurement, the second by guess.
c. He ………. that since an object weighs the same at different heights, it probably continues to feel the same constant force as it falls through these different heights.
a.   1. showed   2. revealed   3. considered   4. suggested
b.   1. examined   2. answered   3. researched   4. found out
c.   1. argued   2. told   3. shared   4. requested

III.   Read the text. Write *true* or *false* next to the statements: [18]

George Bernard Show was born in Dublin on 26th July 1856. His father, George Carr Shaw became a minor official in the Dublin law courts, but after a few years he retired on a small pension and went into business unsuccessfully as a corn merchant. He married the daughter of an Irish landowner, who soon found that her husband was a drunkard and incapable of earning money to provide for her and their three children.

Mrs Shaw had a remarkably good singing voice, and from her and her friends young Bernard learned a lot of operatic music. When he was sixteen his mother and sisters went to live permanently in London, where Mrs Shaw supported herself and her daughters by giving music lessons and singing at concerts.

1. George Bernard Show was a successful corn merchant.
2. His father married a poor wife.
3. George Carr Shaw was a drunkard.
4. George Bernard Show learned a lot about music from his parents.
5. Bernard Show's mother had to work to provide money for herself and daughters.

4.2. Perfect testing items[19]

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[18] The text was excerpted from Ward, A. and then adapted to suit the purposes of this exercise.
[19] Suggested test items were designed in the purpose not only of testing basic aspectual features of English perfect (rf. 3.4.) but as well as of contrasting them with those of English preterit, French preterit and perfect (especially A. IV., rf. 3.5.)

A.   Written, application, accuracy, structured format testing activities

I.   Complete the sentences using the following verbs in the present perfect: find, show, cause, achieve, know

a. The general theory of relativity ……… already ……… that space is not really Euclidean.
b. We …………. connections between arithmetic and geometry since ancient times.
c. Mathematics ………… useful application in the description of the physical world.
d. We …….. just …….. a new acceleration curve.
e. Rise of technology …….never before……confusion about the nature of mathematics.

II. Complete the sentences using the perfect or past simple and an appropriate verb:

1. We ……… not …….. about travels since we were at secondary school.
2. We ………………. the distance five days ago.
3. Last time I …………. him …….. in 1989.
4. They …………….. on this problem for three years.
5. Important discoveries …………….. during the previous century.

III. Put the words in the correct order to form sensible sentences:

1. recently, We, new, a, method, have, found.
2. heard, yet, explanation, Have, reasonable, you, a?
3. today, unsuccessful, Our, have, attempts, been.

IV. Translate the following sentences:

1. Винаги съм харесвал старинните сгради.
2. Самият аз живея в къща, построена преди повече от сто години.
3. Често изследвам строежа и откривам все още незабелязани от мен детайли.
4. От известно време съм собственик и обмислям реконструкцията й.

B.   Written, application, accuracy, fixed format testing activities

I.   Match the phrases from both columns using *because*:

a. He is pleased …………   1. the heating has broken down.
b. We are freezing ………   2. it has been recently repaired.
c. The machine operates normally   3. he has not failed the exam.

II.   Fill in the gaps with the correct present perfect verb:

a. They ………never ………. the star through their telescope.
b. We …………..not …………any results yet.
c. She …... just …….. required speed.

a. 1. look   2. observe   3. prove   4. suppose
b. 1. receive   2. transform   3. obtain   4. decide
c. 1. determine   2. deal   3. use   4. cause

III. Read the text. Write *true* or *false* next to the statements:

Amanda Smith has been committed for long years to the firm she worked for. She has contributed a lot towards the improvement of work in her department, increased sales and attracted new clients. However, John Reed has been helping a lot. Together they've upgraded the company's computer system and made its website easily accessible to the constantly increasing numbers of on-line customers. Senior management has recently promised Amanda promotion. They have both celebrated her success.

1. John doesn't feel happy about Amanda's promotion.
2. John has helped increase sales and attract new customers.
3. Amanda and John have improved the company's computer system.
4. Amanda has made the company's website easily accessible to lots of clients.
5. Senior management has recently promised them promotion.

I shall mention that test correction and further remedial exercises should be justified and supported by appropriate linguistic (tense, aspect and other related categories) contrastively presented explanation, thus aiming at better results due to higher linguistic awareness.

5. Conclusion

In the current article, representing a continuation of a previous paper, as it was mentioned above, the author tried to concisely present her view on the existing connection between NL (FL1) → TL (FL2) and CA in testing and propose some exemplifying test items of English preterit and perfect. The author believes the more contrastively a test item is designed the more useful its application will be and the more reliable information a test will provide. She also reckons that tests are not only meant to provide feedback on effectiveness of teaching and learning but to be implemented at the accurate representation grammar teaching stage as well.

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СТРАТЕГИИ ЗА ТЕСТУВАНЕ ПО АНГЛИЙСКИ ЕЗИК (В РАМКИТЕ НА ПРОЕКТ ЗА ЕЛЕКТРОННО ОБУЧЕНИЕ И ТЕСТУВАНЕ КЪМ ВТУ "ТОДОР КАБЛЕШКОВ", СОФИЯ)

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Резюме: Статията засяга въпроси, свързани както с различните типове тестове и нуждата от тях, така и с подбора и подготовката на тестовите материали. В статията се вземат предвид и някои специфични граматически трудности, изпитвани от обучаемите, в резултат на отрицателен езиков пренос.

Ключови думи: тестове, съпоставителен анализ, предвиждане на грешки, подбор на материали