Form-focused instruction and the acquisition of tense by Dutch-speaking learners of English: Experimental studies into the effects of input practice and output practice

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INTRODUCTION

The instruction of tense

Je suis, tu es, il est, nous sommes, vous êtes, ils sont. I can still remember the first time that I came across this short list of—what seemed to me at the time—challenging verb forms. The year was 1986 and I was taking my first compulsory French class at the age of ten. Back then, I did not think much of the forms. I simply remember rushing home and memorizing the list of forms for next week’s class. A couple of weeks later, once again during my French class, I came across another list of verb forms, which—surprisingly enough—did not bear much resemblance to the first: j’ai, tu as, il a, nous avons, vous avez, ils ont. Unconsciously, I had been trying to memorize the forms of the indicatif présent, the French present indicative, of the verbs être (be) and avoir (have). During the consecutive eight years of French classes, I came across many more lists of verb forms and—horror of horrors—a whole plethora of regular and irregular verb forms with possible meanings and uses which had to be mastered. It took me several years to figure out that what my teachers of French were expecting me to learn were actually tense forms (verb forms that generally express temporal meanings), mood forms (verb forms that generally express concepts such as certainty and uncertainty, obligation and possibility) and combinations of the two.

Teaching approaches may vary but at one point in our scholastic or academic careers in the Western world, most of us are required to take language classes and to master—in some shape or form—tense forms in the languages being learnt. English language classes are no exception in this respect and most English courses focus on tense at one point during the progression through a syllabus. The linguist Geoffrey Leech (2004) starts the third edition of his book Meaning and the English Verb by stating the following about tense:

Every language has its peculiar problems of meaning for the foreign language learner. Many people would agree that in the English language, some of the most troublesome yet fascinating problems are concentrated in the area of the finite verb phrase, including, in particular, tense [emphasis added], aspect, mood and modality. (p. 1)

In 2001, fifteen years after my first encounter with tense during my compulsory French classes, I found myself once again confronted with tense but this time as a beginning lecturer of English grammar in higher education. My target audience consisted of mainly Dutch-speaking students of English, most of whom were aspiring to become translators and interpreters. As the years progressed, I started to notice some recurring grammatical problems that my students, who were intermediate to advanced learners of English, tried to wrap their heads around in class. The grammatical category of tense was one of them. Generally, when I ask students of English what they think about the difficulty of English
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Many reply that English is not that difficult but that the use of the tenses—whatever their definitions of tenses may be—in English can be problematic at times. It is this common reply which ignited my interest in the complexities of the English tense system and in the challenges that both learners and teachers of English as a second language (henceforth ESL learners and ESL teachers) face when dealing with temporal verbal forms in contexts in which explicit grammar instruction is the norm.

My two points of departure for this doctoral dissertation were the following: (1) the problematic nature of tense, which (Dutch-speaking) ESL learners inevitably have to grapple with and (2) the need—as an ESL teacher—to help learners overcome intractable temporal problems by providing them with help in an environment in which explicit grammar instruction is the norm. A traditional teaching approach to grammar—and to a whole range of other language features for that matter—has been the so-called PPP approach, where the three p’s stand for presentation, practice and production (Thornbury, 2003). In the past, much of the practice related to tense (in English) in the PPP approach consisted of mechanical drills, with ESL learners being required to fill in the right temporal form of infinitives provided in situational contexts. Although this approach to practice has found its way into more contemporary language teaching materials (e.g., Aarts & Wekker, 1993; Foley & Hall, 2003; Hoffmann & Hoffmann, 2001) and has proven useful in its own ways, it focuses almost exclusively on the production of output to the exclusion of any other forms of practice. Luckily, we have seen promising changes in materials designed for explicit instruction on tense in L2 English, with the addition of both situational and communicative materials based on, for example, various forms of input-based practice (e.g., grammaticality judgement, picture selection, selecting correct tense forms).

With these added materials come the issues of (1) how to incorporate such practice-based materials into settings in which explicit grammar instruction is the norm and (2) how to select materials based on the treatment effects that they may bring about. These questions encapsulate the essence of the research in this doctoral dissertation. With all the references to practice, one could think that the focus of this dissertation is purely on experimental research and that not much theory is involved in the incorporation of practice-based materials. However, a combination of both theoretical research and experimental research is required to be able to draw conclusions with respect to any acquisitionally informed pedagogy. Consequently, this dissertation will focus on both types of research.

This doctoral dissertation is the culmination of several years of research, which consisted of focusing on the instruction of one specific tense-related issue that appears to be highly problematic for many ESL learners of varying proficiency (i.e., beginner, intermediate, advanced): the distinction between the past and the present perfect when used to locate situations which have taken
place in the past and which are also referred to as bygone situations. Distinguishing between these two tenses when locating bygone situations is problematic and is generally an item of discussion in most descriptive and pedagogical grammars of English (e.g., Aarts & Wekker, 1993; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Declerck, 1991, 2003, 2006; Foley & Hall, 2003; Koning & van der Voort, 1997; Leech, 2003). In addition, it is an issue which is also dealt with in most classes dealing with the English tense system. My research interest, however, was on how this problematic distinction may be dealt with from an instructional point of view through the incorporation of practice as a fundamental component. By focusing on the practice component, I wanted to shed light on the pedagogical implications of two forms of practice—input practice and output practice—on the acquisition of the problematic past/present perfect distinction.

Preview of the chapters
In Chapter 1, *Tense and linguistics*, the grammatical category of tense is placed in a linguistic context. By focusing on recurring linguistic issues in discussions of tense, I have tried to give the targeted past/present perfect distinction a linguistic dimension which takes into account the challenges related to discussing tense in general and the past/present perfect distinction in particular.

Chapter 2, *Tense and complexity*, builds a bridge between the purely linguistic aspects of tense complexity and the challenges that ESL learners—including Dutch-speaking ESL learners—face when trying to acquire tense in English. The chapter sheds light on the mainly qualitative features of tense complexity in an SLA context, which includes—but is not limited to—the discussion of linguistic issues of complexity. In addition to linguistic complexity, issues such as mapping complexity, SLA complexity and other complexity-inducing factors are also discussed.

In Chapter 3, *Tense and instructed SLA*, the focus is placed on tense in a context of instructed SLA. The study of temporality in SLA research came about incidentally but has developed into a well-structured, systematic and methodologically developed area of research. By first highlighting relevant features of studies into L2 temporality, I introduce to the reader the approaches that have been used to study L2 temporality. Subsequently, the focus is placed on instructed SLA and on two approaches that feature practice-based instructional setups as integral parts of the SLA process: (1) input processing and (2) skill acquisition theory. By describing the features of both approaches and by discussing the role of practice in both approaches, I give the reader the necessary background to be able to evaluate the experimental research carried out in later chapters.

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1 For a more nuanced definition of the term *bygone*, see Chapter 1, Section 1.4.1.
Chapter 4, *Study 1*, introduces the first of three studies which are part of the empirical research carried out. By comparing the performances of three treatment groups (input only, input practice, output practice) during the pretest and posttest sessions of the study, the research questions which addressed any differential effects resulting from instructional treatment were investigated. Quantitative data were used to carry out analyses and based upon the results of those analyses, the conclusions drawn with respect to the effects of treatments were that there were no differential effects between the treatments. Consequently, four changes to the research design and methodology were formulated with a view to carrying out an improved second study.

Chapter 5, *Study 2*, covers the second study that was carried out one year later. The participants were new but the research questions were essentially the same as the ones formulated in Study 1. Having implemented the four changes that had been formulated when reporting on Study 1, I once again carried out quantitative analyses but this time with only two treatment groups (input practice, output practice) and with different forms of practice. When comparisons of the pretest and posttest data were carried out, the analyses showed a statistically significant improvement in the participants’ performances. However, once again no differential effects between treatments were found.

Chapter 6, *Study 3*, reports on the third and final study that was carried out. In effect, Study 3 was a replication of Study 2. The only change that was implemented was the addition of a control group to ascertain whether the instruction that was provided to the participants actually brought about significant changes in performance. This brought the number of treatment groups back to three (input practice, output practice, no treatment). The quantitative analyses showed significant increases in test performances for the input-practice and output-practice groups but not for the no-treatment group. However, a comparison of the data from the input-practice and output-practice groups revealed no significant differences between both groups. In other words, no differential effects between the two treatment groups were confirmed.

Chapter 7, *General discussion*, brings the theoretical and experimental chapters together by providing both a summary and a more detailed discussion of the findings from all three studies that were carried out. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the experimental research are highlighted. This is followed by a discussion of the three studies with respect to the implications of the results for language pedagogy. By way of conclusion, suggestions for further research are provided before a final conclusion is drawn.

Recurring themes and terminological issues

*Form–meaning–use mapping.* Although the idea of form-meaning mappings is an extremely common one in linguistics, it may come as a surprise to some that the traditional binary concept of form-meaning mapping has given way to a more extended ternary description in the title including not only form (mor-
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phosyntax) and meaning (semantics) but also use (pragmatics) (see Figure i.1).

The concept of mapping is not new and has been in use—albeit without consistent and explicit references to the term mapping—in linguistics in general and in the field of second language acquisition in particular for quite some time. Over the years, the concept may have undergone some refinements but the approach of visualizing both the various dimensions of grammar and the interaction between those dimensions has proven extremely useful in the fields of language study and second language acquisition. One of the first linguists to introduce and actively promote a mapping approach to language was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He himself took this idea from the field of semiotics and applied it to linguistics and, in so doing, was closely connected to the inception of the concept of linguistic signs (Finch, 2000). Saussure promoted the idea that a linguistic sign consisted of two elements: (1) a signifier (i.e., a pronunciation form) and (2) a signified (i.e., a meaning/sense) (de Saussure, 1983).

The parallelism to the current concept of mapping in the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition is obvious and it is this concept of mapping which has been extensively used to represent language and the learning/teaching of language.

The concept of mapping is a basic concept in the field of (contemporary) SLA research (Saville-Troike, 2006). In the introductory chapter in the book Practice in a Second Language: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology, editor Robert DeKeyser writes that “clearly, form–meaning connections are the essence of language” (2007a, p. 10). Consequently, one could assume that one of the tasks of SLA researchers is to investigate how these form–meaning connections are learnt in an L2. The idea and/or importance of mappings is one which is shared by (SLA) scholars and which is often—directly or indirectly—referred to in the (SLA) literature (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan, 2008; Bates & MacWhinney, 1989; Brown, 2000; DeKeyser, 2005, 2007c; Ellis, 1997; Finch, 2000; Harmer, 2007; Housen, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Salaberry & Shirai, 2002; Saville-Troike, 2006; Skehan, 1998; Thornbury, 1999, 2006; VanPatten, 2002a; VanPatten, Williams, Rott, & Overstreet, 2004). Thus, the ubiquity of and general references to (linguistic) mappings and the overall usefulness of a mapping approach were the two reasons why a mapping approach to grammar was chosen for the research presented here.

2 The concepts of form–meaning mapping and form–function mapping are often used interchangeably in the literature. However, strictly speaking, it could be argued that function entails more than simply meaning. In the case of grammar, knowing what a grammatical feature means (semantics) could be considered one aspect of the acquisition process whereas knowing how to use that feature (pragmatics) could pose an altogether different challenge for L2 learners. A ternary (or tripartite) approach to grammar (form–meaning–use) helps in highlighting possible distinctions between semantics and pragmatics. Such an approach may be used—beyond the discussion of tense—as a general approach to grammar and to grammar instruction in SLA contexts.
Another reason for choosing such an approach is that it can be viewed as approach-neutral/theory-neutral. The adjectives approach-neutral and theory-neutral refer to the idea that the tripartite approach to grammar can be used in a variety of (SLA) approaches and theories (ranging, for example, from approaches and theories with no focus on grammar to approaches and theories with a heavy focus on grammar) without having to worry about any theory-driven problems or inconsistencies. Whereas certain SLA approaches and theories clearly focus on grammar (often even on one specific aspect of grammar (i.e., form, meaning or use) and this to the exclusion of the other dimensions), the idea behind opting for a three-dimensional grammar framework is that such exclusion need not necessarily take place (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Proponents of a three-dimensional grammar framework (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; DeCarrico & Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2001, 2003) seek to promote the idea that all three dimensions of grammar should be embraced and that the study of grammar should not be reduced to the mere study of one dimension but should be undertaken studying all three dimensions. However, this need not be a requirement for using a ternary approach to grammar. A fundamental distinction should be made here between an approach to studying the object of study (i.e., grammar) and an approach to studying the method of how that object is studied. If it is assumed that the object (i.e., grammar) consists of three dimensions (form, meaning and use), there is no absolute need to embrace those three dimensions when undertaking the study, teaching and/or
learning of that object. For the research carried out in this doctoral dissertation, the three dimensions were important but the main focus was on meaning and use, which is explained in more detail in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 and put into practice in the three studies reported on in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. One deciding factor in the discussion of focus on one or several dimensions of grammar could be the ultimate goal of studying, teaching and/or learning the object of grammar. This then brings us back to the importance of the participants’ educational environment and the goal of the participants’ educational programme (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Accuracy, meaningfulness and appropriateness are three factors which influence translators during their educational development and their future careers. Consequently, this trichotomy fits in perfectly with a ternary mapping approach and grammar framework, especially if we take into consideration the educational context in which the participants of the studies found themselves, that is, a bachelor programme in applied linguistics with a specialization in translation.

**English as a second language/English as a foreign language.** In the field of second language acquisition, the concept of a second language often contrasts with the concept of a foreign language, with second-language status being awarded to a language which is learnt in a community where it is used as the usual language for communication (e.g., learning English in England) and foreign-language status being awarded to a language which is being learnt in a community where it is not the usual language for communication (e.g., learning English in Belgium or the Netherlands). With respect to English, this distinction has resulted in the concepts *English as a second language* (ESL) and *English as a foreign language* (EFL). However, the distinction between the two concepts is not systematically adhered to by many researchers. Consequently, the term second language is often used as a cover term for both a second language and a foreign language, regardless of the institutional and/or social role played by the language being learnt. In this dissertation, the term second language will be used as a cover term unless the aforementioned distinction is absolutely essential. This is in line with the belief that the distinction between ESL and EFL is regarded by many as an oversimplification (Nunan, 1999).

**Language acquisition/language learning.** Although many SLA scholars adhere to the language acquisition/language learning distinction (e.g., Krashen, 1981, 1987), this is not a distinction that I will adhere to in this doctoral dissertation. The distinction reflects the idea that language acquisition consists of an unconscious process by which a linguistic system (i.e., language) is internalized and language learning consists of a conscious process by which a linguistic system is internalized. In this doctoral dissertation, language acquisition and language learning will be used interchangeably to refer to the general process by which a linguistic system is internalized. The assumption in this dissertation is
that since all learning is—to some extent—cognitively controlled, the acquisition/learning distinction is not a distinction of kind, but rather a distinction of degree. No differentiated terminology will be used to refer to this distinction of degree.