

Teaching the Transitivity of English Verbs in the Lexical Approach

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Abstract: Teaching English as a Second Language involves various methodologies. The present research will explore means of teaching English verbs in the lexical approach which suggests that the use of verbs be deemed to register as part of the mental lexicon. Since verbs may be used in active or passive voice, the study of transitivity will engage in the analysis of voice. Moreover, the classification of verbs also relate to the characteristics of their corresponding transitivity and voice. *It is worth mentioning that some verbs such as buy may restrict the scope of their passive construction compared with verbs like give and send.* Therefore, the lexical method may successfully integrate vocabulary with the relevant syntactic structures so as to make teaching and learning more concise and efficient. Besides, a circular method in which teaching, testing, and correcting processes are involved will be proposed to improve the language teaching and acquisition.

Keywords: Ergative verbs; Intransitive and transitive verbs; Lexical approach; Transitivity and voice; Second language teaching

Introduction

The processes of language learning are supposed to establish a close relationship with the methods of language teaching. Empirical studies suggest that there be several methods for teaching languages. In addition, there are two common terms that are usually used in extensive literature: first language, hereinafter referred to as L1, is a speaker's mother tongue; meanwhile, second language, hereinafter referred to as L2, is not a speaker's native tongue but the target language that the speaker intends to acquire. The research into English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or Second Language Acquisition (SLA) plays an important role in English language teaching. The three aforementioned terms generally share a similar presupposition teaching English to L2 learners. Moreover, the study on ESL, EFL or SLA may be involved in a broad spectrum of methodology. Saville-Troike (2012) and Saville-Troike and Barto (2016) have adopted several approaches to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), such as contrastive analysis, universal grammar, and functional approaches, etc. The present study will adopt the lexical approach proposed by Lewis (1993, 2008). The goal of the research is to explore certain ways of teaching English verbs in the lexical approach and how transitivity and voice help to classify such verbs in

accordance with their characteristics and prominent features.

As regards the lexical approach, Lewis (1993, 2008) has argued that certain words have been registered in the mental lexicon of competent speakers; besides, the acquisition of lexical items help speakers build up their knowledge of the corresponding lexis in a natural and efficient way, hence help to develop their ability to reduce the interference between L1 and L2. The lexical approach is liable to help language learners gain the lexical modules of English verbs and their corresponding implicit structures in which other constituents are engaged either being obligatory or being optional. For instance, it seems plausible to suggest that ergative verbs be learned in the lexical approach since such verbs play two different roles transitive assignment and intransitive one. Additionally, the transitivity of verbs may be classified by the requirement of objects (either direct or indirect) as their complements. Furthermore, Pinker (1999) argues that since irregular verbs cannot be generated by rules, they are supposed to be learned in the lexical entries by heart. Thus, it is eminently reasonable to study verbs as part of the lexical entries because different types of verbs are used in quite distinct patterns.

Walton (1965), Taylor (1976), Langacker (1982), Dixon (1987), among others have conducted significant research on the transitive, intransitive and ergative verbs. Such studies may help language teachers understand the transitivity of English verbs properly. However, these types of deep analysis will not be applied to the approach to Teaching English as a Foreign Language. That is to say, it is quite important for teachers to seek simple and practical methods for teaching languages to L2 students. After examining plenty of English textbooks, Walton (1965) addresses the issues relating to the dissatisfactory explanation of English transitive and intransitive verbs. He argues that the study into the transitivity of the verbs requires the analysis of active and passive voice (Walton, 1965). In addition to this, Lewis (1993) states that “language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar” (p. 89) and lexical items are classified as single-word slots and multi-word slots such as polywords, collocations, and institutional and idiomatic expressions.

In this paper, I will further propose a circular method (Figure 1) involving the three processes teaching, testing, and correcting. First, teachers instruct the students in a certain type of verbs and draw simple and common syntactic patterns of such verbs. Second, students are tested by applying the extracted structures based on different patterns. Third, language teachers intend to correct these exercises, rectify potential mistakes, and collect both positive and negative feedback from the tests. Finally, teachers will gain immediate prospects of adopting, improving, modifying, or altering analogues methods of teaching in the upcoming tasks. In this way, the teaching, testing, and correcting strategies are assumed to form a circular method of achieving effective teaching goals.

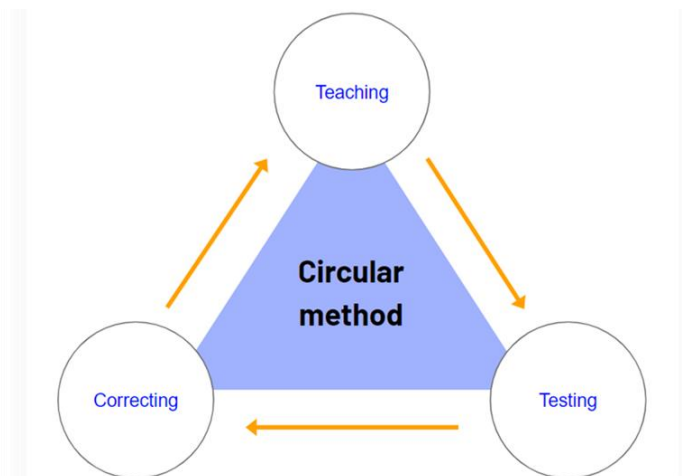


Figure 1: Methodology

Section one will deal with the English intransitive verbs and their corresponding voice. Section two is arranged to analyse the approach to the teaching of transitive verbs. Section three will investigate how ergative verbs diverge from their transitive and intransitive roles. As a result, an optimistic and positive outlook on teaching the transitivity of English verbs in the lexical approach will be broadened. It is worth mentioning that the approach to teaching ESL or EFL is on the basis of surface structures. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) mainly focuses on the learnability of a second language and the process of acquiring such a new language. The primary goal that a language teacher needs to achieve is to teach students in a concise and understandable way. In addition, teaching L2 students the profound syntactic analysis during the early stage is not recommended. Hirsh (2018) states that vocabulary learning is a process of long-term memory register and Thornbury (2018) argues that the cross-linguistic effect will help L2 learners take advantage of positive transfer in L1 and L2 contrastive grammar references and consciously reduce errors due to the L1 transfer. Thus, the lexical approach is highly liable to be an effective and reliable method for teaching and learning a second language, especially the verb system.

Section 1: Intransitive Verbs

It is likely that English verbs are grouped into copular, pure intransitive, pure transitive and ergative types. Since copular verbs have no characteristics of transitivity and voice, the present research principally focuses on the intransitive, transitive, and ergative groups. Taylor (1976) has stated that the lexical entries of verbs in a dictionary have indicated their transitivity and have registered some corresponding ways of using them; he also argued that the syntactic constructions of the verb meet differ partially from the structures of either arrive or find. As far as transitivity is concerned, I find out that arrive is a pure intransitive verb and find is a pure transitive one; however, the verb meet can

be used in both transitive and intransitive constructions. Taylor (1976) asserted that meet in They meet is considered to be “pseudo-intransitive” and such a corresponding use requires a plural subject. Indeed, the transitive assignments of meet demand two NP arguments one for subject and the other for object. Thus, verbs such as meet are treated as ergative verbs which will be examined in section three.

(1) To go

- a) We go there by car.
- b) Shall we go now?
- c) They went to the airport on Friday.

(2) To laugh

- a) She was laughing.
- b) Was he laughing?
- c) They didn't laugh.

(3) To come

- a) Taylor came to the party yesterday.
- b) Joe will come here after lunch.
- c) Taylor and Joe have come.

Practising and testing

Madsen (1983) has developed several techniques in testing L2 students; the methods of individual testing and speaking testing are adopted in the current discussion and proposal. Moreover, Larsen-Freeman' (2000) teaching techniques such as repetition drill, single-slot substitution drill, and multiple-slot substitution drill are considered to be practical and effective. Thus, these methods will be implemented in the practising and testing stage. For instance, stay in clause (4) is an intransitive verb and it requires one NP which is the subject of the predicate. Taking further step, teachers may parse the sentence (4) and draw a simple syntactic pattern (5):

(4) Daniel stayed at home last night.

(5) NP stay

The initial objective is to motivate students to produce clauses as similar as possible to the corresponding pattern. As a result, they may utter sentences as follows:

(6) John is going to stay.

(7) Sorry, we can't stay here.

(8) I stayed at home yesterday.

Analogously, rise in clause (9) and arrive in (13) have the patterns in (10) and (14)

respectively. Students may articulate sentences such as (11) and (12) according to the structure shown in (10), and generate both (15) and (16) based on (14).

- (9) The tuition fees have risen.
- (10) NP rise
- (11) The river has risen slowly.
- (12) Smoke rose from the factory building.
- (13) The football players arrived last week.
- (14) NP arrive
- (15) Sandra arrived at the concert at 8 pm.
- (16) Joe will arrive in NYC.

Moreover, an NP-substitution method is plausible to be integrated into the practice as (17) and (18):

- (17) Taylor arrived.
- (18) Joe arrived.

The weather words, seem, and the like

Although the previous clauses appear to be in active voice constructions, note that not all pure intransitive verbs have grammatical voice and these intransitive verbs mainly refer to the weather words, seem and the like.

- (19) It rained all night. (Rain)
- (20) It will snow. (Snow)
- (21) It has been drizzling these weeks. (Drizzle)
- (22) It seems that you are lying. (Seem).

Section 2: Transitive Verbs

In the previous section, pure intransitive verbs play the major role. In this section, pure transitive verbs will take the stage. It is considered that transitive verbs take objects and most of them can be used in passive voice. Moreover, this type of verbs may be monotransitive and/or ditransitive. The former requires two NPs (arguments), and the latter demands three NPs (arguments).

Monotransitive verbs

A monotransitive verb entails 2 NPs (arguments): one is the subject and the other is the object. As usual, teachers may first present the topic as demonstrated in the following clauses:

- (23) To have (cannot be used in Passive voice)

- a) I have a brand new car. (Active voice)
- b) Shall we have dinner now? (Active voice)
- c) A lot of homework was had. (Passive voice)

(24) To love (can be used in passive voice)

- a) Bob loves birthday presents. (Active voice)
- b) Does Andy love the English textbook? (Active voice)
- c) She was loved by Brad. (Passive voice)

(25) To adore (can be used in passive voice)

- a) Taylor doesn't adore cats. (Active voice)
- b) Joe might adore pop music. (Active voice)
- c) The weather forecasts are adored by the public. (passive voice)

Note that have cannot be used in passive voice so the clause in (23c) is ungrammatical. The majority of monotransitive verbs can be used in passive constructions as in (24) and (25).

Practising and testing

On the one hand, a method of deriving the pattern in (26) from data will be first employed. On the other hand, students are encouraged to formulate sentences such as (27)-(35) and practise how to use these verbs as frequently as possible.

(26) NP like/avoid/praise NP

(27) Dogs like cats. (Active voice)

(28) Peter likes dark chocolate. (Active voice)

(29) Sandra doesn't like chocolate cake. (Active voice)

(30) Taylor avoided Tylor yesterday. (Active voice)

(31) Peter has avoided fast food. (Active voice)

(32) Andy has been avoided these days. (Passive voice)

(33) The guests praised the host. (Active voice)

(34) David praised our work. (Active voice)

(35) The president was praised by the public. (Passive voice)

Ditransitive verbs

Ditransitive verbs entail 3 NPs (arguments): one for subject, one for direct object, and one for indirect object. This type of verbs can be used in passive voice in certain constructions. For instances:

(38) To tell

- a) I will tell you the truth. (Active voice)
- b) She can tell jokes to us after dinner. (Active voice)

c) Jokes have been told to us (by her). (Passive voice)

(39) To send

- a) Bob sent a birthday present to Joe. (Active voice)
- b) Joe was sent a birthday present (by Bob). (Passive voice)
- c) A birthday present was sent to Joe (by Bob). (Passive voice)

(40) To show

- a) Will Taylor show me her house? (Active voice)
- b) Joe showed his love letters to Taylor. (Active voice)
- c) They were shown the door at the museum. (Passive voice)

Practising and testing

Active voice: Based on the patterns given in (41), students will be motivated to imitate such structures and be able to form sentences such as (42)-(49):

- (41) NP buy/leave/give NP NP
- (42) He will buy you a new car.
- (43) Peter bought himself a beautiful house.
- (44) Sandra didn't buy Peter cake.
- (45) Taylor left Tylor some cash.
- (46) Peter has left Andy a note.
- (47) Anne wants to leave him some flowers.
- (48) The guests gave the hosts beautiful presents.
- (49) John always gives his parents a warm welcome.

Passive voice: Either DO (direct object) or IO (indirect object) of affirmative active clauses involving the ditransitive leave and give can be the surface subjects in the corresponding passive constructions:

- (50) A note has been left to Andy (by Peter). [cf (46)]
- (51) Andy has been left a note (by Peter). [cf (46)]
- (52) Beautiful presents were given to the hosts (by the guests). [cf (48)]
- (53) The hosts were given beautiful presents (by the guests). [cf (48)]

However, buy differs from leave and give. It is likely that students make similar mistakes shown in (54c) and (55c). Thus, helping students to make corrections promptly becomes teachers' task. Let us examine how to use buy in certain constructions:

- (54) Buy (ditransitive): NP buys NP NP
 - a) He will buy you a new car. (Active voice)
 - b) Peter bought his son a beautiful house. (Active voice)

c) His son was bought a beautiful house. (Passive voice)

(55) Buy (monotransitive): NP buys NP (for NP)

- a) Peter bought a beautiful car for his son. (Active voice)
- b) A beautiful car was bought for Peter's son. (Passive voice)
- c) Peter's son was bought a beautiful car. (Passive voice)

Note that Peter's son in (54b), (54a), (55b), and (55c) is the recipient and beneficiary of the action. The clauses (54c) and (55c) are ungrammatical and it is assumed that the property of the verb buy restricts the scope of its passive construction. As a result, the lexical approach is deemed to help students identify the similarities and differences between verbs like buy and verbs like leave and give.

Section 3: Ergative Verbs

Taylor (1976) cited Halliday's proposal that the subject of a transitive construction is an "actor" and the corresponding object is a "goal" while in ergative construction the subject and object are "causer" and "affected" respectively. Since the ergative verbs may be used either in transitive constructions or in intransitive ones, this type of verbs cannot be merely classified as either transitive or intransitive verbs. Dixon (1987) has provided a deep analysis of ergative cases as well as a study of the relation between transitive and intransitive verbs, and their relevant passive constructions in the grammatical case system. Dixon's research may help language teachers understand transitivity clearly. However, it is not rational to adopt such a comprehensive method to teach L2 students in the initial stage. Therefore, the lexical approach is still deemed to be the protagonist of teaching ergative verbs. Let us analyse some instances:

(56) To change

- a) Their attitudes have changed. (Intransitive)
- b) They have changed their opinions. (Transitive)

(57) To improve

- a) The quality of the services has improved. (Intransitive)
- b) They have improved their English. (Transitive)

(58) To fly

- a) The birds are flying in the sky. (Intransitive)
- b) The pilots are flying a private aircraft. (Transitive)

From (56) to (58), change, improve, and fly are ergative verbs. In (58b), the pilots are the "actor" of flying in transitive construction. It can also be said that a private aircraft in a private aircraft is flying is the "affected" object. However, in (58a), the birds are flying

and able to fly. Indeed, a sentence like someone is flying a bird may lead to ambiguous readings. One interpretation is that someone is sitting on the bird and flying with the support of it. The other reading may be that the bird is treated as a means of transportation and someone makes use of it.

Practising and testing

Ergative verbs are common in English. For example, begin, eat, grow, move, open, play, run, start, stop, swim, taste, etc. can be used in either intransitive or transitive constructions. Let us now examine the verb open:

(59) To open (intransitive use): NP open

- a) The stores open at 8 am.
- b) The shopping centre always opens.
- c) The supermarket generally opens at 7 am.

(60) To open (transitive use): NP opens NP

- a) Someone opened the door yesterday. (Active voice)
- b) Peter opened the present box. (Active voice)
- c) The present box was opened by Peter. (Passive voice)

(61) Open (adjective)

- a) The door is open.
- b) The box is open.

Those sentences in (59) demonstrate that open can be used in intransitive construction and the “affected” roles (the stores, the shopping centre, the supermarket) are found in the subject positions and there are not “causers” to be seen in the surface structure. In (60a) and (60b), there are both “actors” (someone and Peter) and “goals” (the door, the present box). Besides, the verbs in these two clauses are in active voice. However, in (60c), the “goal” (the present box) is located in the subject position and the “actor” (Peter) is found in the by phrase. Therefore, the research into the relation between transitivity and voice will help teachers gain a development prospect of different types of verbs.

Discussion

Pure intransitive verbs will never be used in passive constructions and most of these verbs have grammatical voice. However, the weather words seem, and the like have no voice. It is considered that transitive verbs are involved in active voice and the majority of pure transitive verbs can be used in passive voice except those such as have. Moreover, ergative verbs play two different roles in syntactic constructions and preserve a dual identity. In other words, the intransitive assignments of ergative verbs will not

engage in passive voice compared with the transitive forms used in the passive constructions. Therefore, the research into the transitivity of English verbs requires the analysis of voice because the active and passive voices reflect the properties of verbs (Table 1).

Table 1: The Transitivity of English verbs

Intransitive		Transitive		Ergative	
with concrete subjects	weather words and <i>seem</i> (with expletive subjects)	Mono-transitive	ditransitive	intransitive	transitive
To go	To rain	To buy	To buy	To change	To change
To come	To snow	To have	To give	To improve	To improve
This type of intransitive verbs may be used in active voice but not in passive voice.	No voice can be applied.	Most transitive verbs can be used in passive constructions but verbs like <i>have</i> cannot. Moreover, the properties of the verbs such as <i>buy</i> will limit the scope of their passive constructions.		Passive voice depends on their transitive properties.	

Conclusion

In addition, monotransitive verbs like *have* cannot be used in passive voice and the property of the verb *buy* limits the scope of its passive construction. In the case of ergative verbs, the use of passive voice will depend on their transitive properties. The lexical approach will provide a simple and effective method of introducing English verbs and acquiring their syntactic structures without directly applying the deep analysis of syntax. The teaching, testing, and correcting processes will form a circular method that will improve the means of second language teaching and acquisition.

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